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A NOVEL.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "THE GARDEN OF EDEN,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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GRISELDA.

CHAPTER I.

HEW would ever forget that eventful night at Crowsfoot Station, after the terrible news had been telegraphed that the 6.20 train from London was run into by an express, and was smashed, telescoped, crushed.

The crowd of villagers—parents, children, or wives, and their relatives—who had beloved ones in the doomed train, still wailed and cried, a surging ungovern-

able crowd upon the platform. Doctor Mayne and the station-master tried in vain to calm and to disperse them.

Hugh Blunt — who had sickened to faintness at the sight of his love Griselda coming in to learn that not only her beloved father, but Hal Romaine, whom she so dearly loved, was a passenger in the wrecked train — speedily recovered. For Griselda glided through the crowd like a ghost, and laid her hand upon his arm.

‘Tell me, please,’ she said.

She was perfectly composed. Hugh marvelled—wondered.

‘Mr Black—may not—perhaps—most likely, has not come by this—we don’t know—I should think not,’ he faltered and stammered out.

‘Papa was coming by this train. What-

ever has happened, he is there. Now, what is to be done?’

Those great eyes looked searchingly into his out of that beautiful face—oh, so deadly pale!

‘How can we get to him?’

‘We cannot! It is forty miles down the line!’ cried Hugh.

‘Forty miles! Cannot we catch a down train to Cowbrook Junction, and get a special?’

‘By that time he might be here—then the traffic is suspended—then’—Hugh drew a deep breath before he could stab his darling to the heart. ‘Griselda,’ he said, miserably, and for once the tears ran plentifully from his eyes, ‘dear Sir Hubert is in there—the waiting-room—struck down, poor father—he came to meet his son.’

Griselda was only a girl. She swerved;

then Hugh caught her. She had fainted. But her strong will overcame impressions. In a few moments she struggled up.

‘I know — I understand,’ she said pantingly. ‘There is the doctor. We must not think of ourselves. Doctor Mayne—Sir Hubert—poor Sir Hubert! Let me help—’

‘She knows all,’ said Hugh.

‘It will do her good to help,’ said the little doctor. ‘Now, Griselda, my dear, you will very likely have to be nurse for some time to come; so, before you really perform—before the wounded and those to help them arrive—you may have a little practice. Sir Hubert is in there. Come along!’

‘Action is everything,’ he thought. ‘In such a crisis, in such suspense, to pause to think means madness.’

He supported Griselda into the waiting-room. There, on an improvised couch of a mattress and blankets, hastily furnished by the station-master, lay Sir Hubert Romaine.

The old man looked grander in the semblance of death — stretched out stiff and straight, his hands lying limply at his sides, his regular features sunken, livid, his grey hair wet with the cooling lotion the station-master's wife, kneeling at his side, was gently dabbing on his pale brow—than in ruddy life, when he had a half-shy, half-proud, and somewhat undignified presence, born of his subservience to his imperious wife.

‘Miss Black will take your place, Mrs Wright. We shall want you and your house directly,’ said Doctor Mayne, in a low tone. So Mrs Wright gave her

place to Griselda. Doctor Mayne gave her his directions in the common-place business-like way in which surgeons face their awful responsibilities and fight death ; and Hal Romaine's beloved was alone with Hal Romaine's father in his dire need and sore danger.

What a strange scene — the waiting-room, with its drawn venetian blinds, heavy table, and coarse leather-covered chairs on the cocoa-nut matting ! Sir Hugh lay opposite the fireplace. Griselda's eyes would rest upon a gaudy advertisement of some provincial hotel. There was the palatial building, with a grand garden and a planted carriage-road, with ladies on horseback careering and prancing, and barouches and victorias coming and going, and underneath was the printed sentence,— ‘ The

Universal Hotel Company, Limited.
Capital, £500,000.'

How small, poor, and pitiful the pictured scheme looked here now, in that silent room, with one dim candle burning, and that awful hum—wail, mingled with the tread of many feet upon the gravel outside!

'In the midst of life we are in death.' The well-known words were truths to-day, she felt, as she watched the seemingly dying man. A stupor, a mental drowsiness was coming to numb her emotions—God's merciful help to those in such straits.

Then she heard a shout, a roar, going up from the crowd outside.

A pilot engine!

Outside, under the stars, the station-master had called aside Hugh, Doctor Mayne, and the curate, all of whom were

in the Romaine circle, and, as he was doing their best to soothe and tranquillise the relatives whose beloved ones were in the wrecked train. He took them to the end of the platform where late autumn roses gleamed white in the darkness against the low brick wall, and said,—

‘We shall know the worst directly. A pilot is on the way.’ At that moment, ‘ting-ting’ went the electric bell. ‘There!’ said Mr Wright significantly, hurrying off. ‘In three minutes at the utmost.’

If Hugh had been forewarned of those three minutes, he would have anticipated exquisite mental torture.

As it was, no sooner had he heard that the crucial moment was at hand than he became calm, cool. His emotions were petrified, his active power was keenly alive, his will was a rock.

He did not know how, or why, or when this happened. He only knew it was so, and said, 'Thank God!'

The others—Doctor Mayne and Mr Vivian, the curate—seemed equally prepared with himself.

During that three minutes they talked commonplaces.

'Everything is ready upstairs,' said the doctor. 'Mrs Mayne came—I sent her back for stores—she is here—with the maid. I sent off a very good old widow, Mrs Hood, to prepare Jemima for contingencies. Ah, there are my colleagues!'

He went off to meet three local doctors.

'Has anyone sent for Lady Romaine—sent to Feather's Court?'

'It was the first thing I did,' lisped Mr Vivian.

He was a younger son of people

not 'eccentrically philanthropic.' His first thought had been for Lady Romaine, who had been an active agent in introducing him to Crowsfoot, and Crowsfoot to him.

The son of the miller with whom the Reverend Mr Vivian lodged went off on his father's heavy cob with a hastily-written note, intended to prepare Lady Romaine for the impending shock. When that sullen, desperate roar went up from the agonised crowd on the platform as the pilot engine came dashing along the line, and drew up at the station, Hal's mother was on her way to learn the worst.

'It has come!' muttered Hugh, involuntarily clenching his fists in his effort to prepare himself for the blow.

As the engine stopped, the two blackened men — driver and stoker — were

rushed at by the white-faced, eager crowd. Men and boys tried to clamber upon the engine, to swarm upon it. The engine-driver had borne this scene whenever he had stopped.

‘Back — hold back, can’t yer?’ he cried roughly. Then he made a sign to the station-master, whom he knew. Mr Wright struggled bravely to reach him, but failed. The curate tried to expostulate. Good people, pray be calm,’ he mildly said. But his voice was as a whisper in a roaring whirlwind. Suddenly Hugh skirted the crowd, and sprang upon the engine.

‘Drive on a bit!’ he cried.

The driver obeyed. The pilot was off a hundred yards before anyone actually knew that she was gone.

‘Now!’ said Hugh fiercely.

‘Never saw such a sight, sir, and I’ve been in many accidents. Train regular smashed and minced into splinters no bigger than this here little finger-nail o’ mine. Dead? I’d rather be one of them corpses than them poor unfort’nits as have got to lie in such mortal agonies as I never see. It’s enough to sicken a feller for railways for his life. Fault? Nobody’s fault, as far as I knows. Did I reco’nise anyone? Yes, I did—two—a pal o’ mine—a nephew of my wife’s, who was a-lying on the embankment lookin’ for all the world as if he was asleep and a-dreamin’ like my little ’un at home in his bassinet; he was stone dead, he was. I reco’nised him, but only one other. Rest seemed to me to be muddled up like, just like a heap of Punches and Judys. No, they didn’t move, and there weren’t much

noise. Did you reco'nise anyone, Bill?' —to the stoker. 'No? Well, he's fresh on the line, sir. The other? It's a poor tale to tell; but t'other was the wally, as they call 'em, to the young gentleman at Feather's Court. He worn't dead. He wor in a second-class, front of the train. He knew me, he did. He sent arter me. I come to him. "I'm a-dying'," he ses. I didn't say "nay." He wos a-dyin', if ever a man wos. I ses, "You hain't got no call to bother about anything as you leave behind, old man?" He ses, "No"—at least if you can call it a sayin'; for I see his lips move, and didn't hear. I stoops close, and he ses, "My young master—and Mr Black. Take care of the luggage—take care of the luggage." Then he gave a gasp like a fish wriggling on the grass, and he was gone too. Them were his

last words, "Take care of the luggage." "

'And—and—the gentlemen?' panted Hugh.

'Lor' bless you, sir! They was in at the back; I giv' one look. That was enough for me!' He turned aside, and spat significantly. 'There's no call to tell yer what I see. But it ain't no manner of use bolstering up the truth. There ain't a man at the rear of that train as'll live to tell the tale, and that's about it.'

One instant's horrible silence—a transfiguration of misery to Hugh; then he turned, wan and ghastly, and motioned the driver to return to the platform.

The terrible tale was soon told. The agitation gave way to a panic-stricken hush. Some of the widows and orphans were supported from the scene. These

were not a few, for the 6.20 train from London picked up bricklayers, labourers, and others all along the line who lived at Crowsfoot, tempted there by the advantages enjoyed by the Crowsfoot people under John Black's ministration.

The curate and Doctor Mayne, aided by practitioners from neighbouring villages, and those clergymen who had heard the bad news, did what they could. But little Doctor Mayne's stern self-possession was nearly upset when Mr Wright, the station-master, said to him in a bitter sort of way,—

‘Ah, it's all no go, sir! They mean well; but we want *him*.’

At the ‘him’ he choked, and hurried away. The Vicar, John Black—the one who had moulded and led these people for so many years, who knew their lives

almost as well as he knew his own—was dead, or dying!

Hugh's one thought was—Griselda. He must tell her, he must tell her, he feverishly repeated to himself. Oh, would his merciful God give him the strength to crush that dear heart in the least cruel way? Trust the task to another? Not he! If it killed her—he must soften the torture—he would be able to soften the torture, he loved her so. But he must have one moment alone, silent.

He made his way through the station, and, crossing the yard, leaned up against the paling of a copse known for its nightingales. It was now silent as death. The nightingales had fled south; but he was glad. Their song just then would have jarred upon him.

He drew a long breath, lifted his hat,

and let the cool night-wind blow about his hair. He looked up at the shining stars, each one a great world, a link in the eternal chain of a blessed Eternity. The thought of how short, how fleeting, though how important was this life, with its grinding cares, bitter disappointments, sudden joys, and terrible catastrophes, steadied him. Hugh was not religious, according to the orthodox meaning of the term. But he was deeply thinking, and he knew that man's soul, with its possibilities, could not be only for days, weeks, months, or even years,—for, indeed, any limited existence.

‘I must do it.’

He faced his duty. He turned to go and perform it, when two red sparks danced in the dark road to his left, where he could just see the tall black

trees, blacker than their dusky background; thin wheels grated on the gravel, and a vehicle came dashing into the station-yard.

The light dog-cart from Feather's Court — Lady Romaine! He hurried forward. As the cart drew up, the station door opened, a flood of light fell upon the unfortunate mother. She was white, panting—all dignity gone—she almost fell out of the dog-cart into Hugh's arms.

'My boy, my boy! Where is he?' she gasped, clinging to Hugh. 'Oh, Mr Blunt, have pity! Take me to him!'

'Hush! You must hope, we must hope,' said Hugh vaguely. 'Oh, Doctor Mayne'—with relief, as the doctor came hurrying out, — 'here is Lady Romaine!'

‘Ah, that’s right!’ said the doctor cheeringly. ‘Now, my dear madam, we must not exaggerate, we must bear up. Come into Mrs Wright’s room. Take my arm.’ Then, supporting the trembling woman, he whispered, ‘Tell Griselda all; she will break it to her the best. Bring her to Mrs Wright’s room at once.’

While Mrs Wright attended to Lady Romaine and Doctor Mayne gave her a composing draught, Hugh went to Griselda.

She was still sitting there, waiting, bathing Sir Hubert’s forehead. She had heard the bustle and the cries and the sad hush outside. No one had come to tell her what news had arrived. But her life had taught her to wait.

She raised her eyes as Hugh came

in, and read all there was to read in his grief-stricken face.

She rose—gestured to him to stay, and stepped softly to him.

‘Both?’ she asked.

‘We — cannot — hear. Perhaps — neither.’

‘God will help us!’ said the stricken girl. And her eyes seemed lighted by a supernatural ray as she looked upward. Life—this life seemed to her over—past, gone. They had begun another. She and all those suddenly bereaved had begun to follow.

‘Lady Romaine is here. Will you tell her?’

‘When I know what there is to tell.’

Hugh briefly narrated the arrival of the pilot-engine and the driver’s story.

‘We might have hoped but for that

valet's last words,' he added. 'It is certain they were in the train.'

'Take me,' said Griselda, putting her hand on Hugh's arm. He led her through the stragglers waiting about the station in vague expectation of they knew not what, out upon the platform. Here the station-master came up, a new excitement barely veiled by his self-controlled manner.

'A special is signalled — Cowbrook Junction.'

'Any directions?'

'We don't know what she is yet. But she may be bringing—some—home.'

'You must prepare, Lady Romaine, and be prepared yourself, for anything,' said Hugh to Griselda desperately. Then the door of the station-master's sitting-room closed upon her.

How incongruous! Lady Romaine, in her fine silk dinner-dress, jewels on throat and arms, and glittering rings in her ears and on her fingers, lay back in Mrs Wright's basket-chair by the fire, sobbing, her handkerchief to her eyes. Mrs Mayne kneeling by her, Doctor Mayne standing on the hearth-rug, vainly trying to soothe her before taking her to her husband.

‘You know we cannot have this sort of thing near Sir Hubert,’ he said to Griselda, as she came up to him. He spoke impatiently. He thought Lady Romaine's lack of self-control unpardonable selfishness.

Lady Romaine, suddenly looking up, saw Griselda.

‘Is he—is there news?’ she almost shrieked. The girl's composure made her hope. ‘Oh, tell me!’

She clutched at Griselda's hands. And Griselda only felt that this was her beloved, lost Hal's mother. The sight reanimated her, as the sight of her fatherless children will sometime reanimate a new-made widow.

'Leave us,' she said. Then she knelt down by Lady Romaine, and, caressing her hands, looked into her swollen eyes with love and hope. She talked in a firm, yet tender way, as to an unreasonably frightened child. She admitted that the accounts of the accident were alarming. But they must allow for exaggeration. 'My father seems to have been with him,' she said; 'and he always travels in the middle of the train. The 6.20 is a long train, too.' She would not even admit that, if not killed, their travellers must

be wounded. But Lady Romaine was unreasonable. One minute she was dissolved in tears, the next she sprang up, wringing her hands, wailing out that she could not bear it, she could not bear it.

‘What should I do without Hal?’ was her cry.

‘You can do anything—we can bear anything!’ said Griselda. ‘Oh, Lady Romaine, I have loved Hal ever since I was a tiny child, and my one great pleasure was to see him—anywhere, anyhow, even if he did not see me. But I had to learn to do without him. It seemed very hard. But, after I had borne it a day, it seemed easier to bear it a week, and, after I had borne it a month, I knew I could bear it a year, and even a lifetime; and, if necessary, you will feel this—’

‘Oh no, no, never!’ cried the unhappy woman, in a fresh agony. ‘I am not like you. After living with your father in that poor, wretched way, you might put up with anything. But I have always had everything I wanted. Oh, it is too hard—too cruel!’

‘Hush!’ said Griselda suddenly.

There was a rush of many feet, the murmur of voices, then a shrill whistle, and the hoarse panting of an engine.

The mother started up with a shriek. She and Griselda were alone.

‘Why, it is a train! They have come!’

Someone looked in, banged the door, and locked it on the outside.

‘They have locked us in!’ Lady Romaine flew to the door, shook it, beat against it, screamed, ‘Let me out, let me out!’ She was fairly maddened

by this, which she thought meant the worst ; then she rushed to the window, threw it open, and leant out.

Hastily-improvised torches were flaring, the fitful light flickering upon the ghastly sight of covered, still forms being lifted from the compartments of a special train of a few carriages. Griselda watched with silent horror over her shoulder.

Lady Romaine was speechless now ; and, when someone beckoned Doctor Mayne and the station-master, and the three together lifted a body out of a first-class carriage covered with Hal's travelling coat, she gave a low moan, tottered back, and fell in a heap upon the floor.

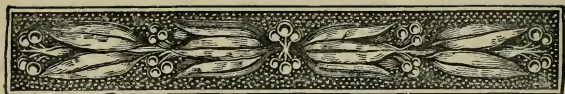
Griselda could not help her. Sick and faint, she leant back against the window-sill. The voices and sounds seemed to

recede, the lights to grow dim and to disappear, like lamps in a dense fog.

How long they remained thus she could not have told. She felt chill. She afterwards remembered noticing the scent of some late mignonette in a flower-box on the window-sill, and seeing Mrs Wright's tabby cat jump up on a chair and rub against her. That was all.

Then the door was roughly unlocked, and forms came flocking in; and a voice cried 'Mother!' and there was talking and tramping about; and she knew no more till she felt warm drops tumbling on her face, and her hands being kissed by rough kisses; and she awoke to find her head resting on her father's knee, and he, well, strong, bending over his exhausted but happy child.

Then her tired eyes saw another face. And Griselda felt—as if she were in heaven.



CHAPTER II.

THE railway accident and those horrible hours of suspense were things of the past. Their effects were being dealt with. Crowsfoot and its inhabitants were busy.

The Vicar's story of his and Hal's escape was a strange one. The two were locked into a first-class compartment, and the doomed train was on the point of starting, when the Vicar suddenly found that he had left his pocket-book containing the bundle of letters given him by the lawyers when

they disclosed his true story to him at Hal's chambers. To open the door with his own railway-key was an instant's work. Hal, startled, sprang out after him. They had barely time to see Chancell — the unfortunate valet who was to die in an hour or two—and shout to him to wait at the station or proceed to Feather's Court with the luggage, and say they would arrive by a later train — before the ill-fated 6.20 moved off and had started on her death-journey.

They returned to Pall Mall, found the pocket-book, and, after chatting over a cup of coffee, strolled back to the station to start by the 8.15 train.

The first shock was when Hal showed the tickets at the barrier, and the man informed him that 'there wouldn't 'be

no more trains on that there line that night. The line was blocked.'

Bit by bit—for the officials were reticent—they learned the dreadful truth. Then both, agitated, thought of Griselda. To do Hal justice, his second thought was for his father. The idea of the mother, who had first spoiled and then thwarted him, never once troubled him.

They went to the telegraph office. Telegraphic communication was interrupted.

'What is to be done?' said the Vicar, in despair. It was not only his darling's anxiety and suspense that wrung his heart—it was the thought of so many of his flock he intimately knew in pain, in danger—agony of body and mind—and he not there to help.

'We must have a special,' said Hal,

hurrying him off to the chief office of the London terminus.

They were civilly received. But at the idea of a private special the heads of the official department looked doubtful.

‘You see we have no precedent, gentlemen.’

Hal, in his passionate turmoil, strode about the office and offered double—treble—the usual fee. But—

‘Money is no object at this juncture,’ gravely said the treasurer. ‘Still, if you will wait a minute, I will see what can be done.’

He disappeared behind the scenes, and presently came back to say that, if they chose to be volunteers for the special train which was on the point of starting for the scene of the catastrophe

with doctors, nurses, and ambulance necessities, he would smuggle them in.

They acquiesced with grateful alacrity, and Hal insisted on leaving his name to head any number of subscriptions which might follow the disaster. Then they started with the relieving contingent. They gave active help to the few maimed survivors at the Junction, the sickening scene of the smash; then they proceeded, with the injured and the dead, along the line to Crowsfoot. The body covered with Hal's travelling-coat—which Lady Romaine saw through the window of the station-master's parlour—was that of poor Chancell, Hal's faithful valet.

The general bereavement brought people to a level. No distinction was made. While Sir Hugh lay in his

grand bed-chamber, gradually rallying from what proved to be a mild paralytic seizure, poor labourers who had not been too dangerously wounded to be taken to Feather's Court occupied the soft satin-hung beds in the guest chambers. There was a staff of nurses, among whom Hal's younger sister, the bright, fair-haired Mabel, and Griselda, were juniors,—and took orders from the experienced as meekly as if they had been two under-housemaids in the great mansion. Lady Romaine, who was still in a low nervous state, with occasional bursts of hysterical tears, hovered about and humbly offered her services. That cruel night had changed the proud self-assertive lady into a timid trembling woman.

The chartering of the Court as a

hospital was Hal's doing. The scene—when he was surrounded by the maimed, the dead, and the dying, and knew that but for some almost miraculous accident—that simple incident of the Vicar's forgetfulness of his pocket-book—he would have made one of the ghastly crowd, was before him wherever he went. He was haunted by the words, 'One shall be taken, and the other left.' He had never been so impressed—so awe-stricken.

'I cannot understand it,' he said, when he brought himself to tell the Vicar of his feelings. 'Here is my brother, a steady-going serious fellow, who carries off prizes by the half-dozen, and tells the girls a parson's life is a sort of heaven on earth which he longs to enter, he would make a far better head

of the family than I ever can! There is a warp in me—I cannot settle down. With one exception, I am changeable as the wind. I like a thing to-day which is hateful to me to-morrow; I hunt eagerly and closely for some fancy which possesses me, like a child hunts a butterfly; but the moment I know I may seize it, I turn aside, disgusted. Yet I am left—left. What for? I can never do any good. I am doomed to be a curse.’

The Vicar took Hal’s talk at his own valuation, and, if he did not exactly preach, spoke sensibly of life and its peculiarities.’

‘I know more about you than you do yourself, my boy,’ he said. ‘I know your grave faults and your noble qualities. You, as it were, hold your

future in your own hands. You are the scales to weigh the good and the bad—as they are to be—in your own life to come.’

The Vicar went from the station-master’s, where the hopeless cases were ebbing out their last breaths, to Doctor Mayne’s, where the complicated surgical cases were domiciled, and from there to the Feather’s Court hospital daily, sometimes twice. Yet no word of his changed circumstances, his parentage, his new name, had escaped him, even to Griselda.

All personal matters, even in those most wrapt up in self, seemed merged in the general catastrophe. During these days Hal, Griselda, Mabel, Hugh Blunt were little else but comrades. Hugh Blunt had mentally resigned Griselda,

and, from his experience of the Romaynes at this crisis, was inclined to have less fear for her future. The brother of that open-hearted generous Mabel could not be actually a bad fellow.

Lydia, Hal's elder and languid sister, was in Scotland, staying with some noble friends who rented a deer-forest. Hal's brother was at school, and Griselda's brothers, Tom and Harry, were also away. Those four—Hal, Griselda, Hugh, and Mabel, with Mervyn Bray as an amiable but diffident fifth—shared the burden of the sick men, talked over the cases as their one joint interest in life, hoped against hope, and were cast down and had to be comforted when one of the flickering life-flames they were watching went out.

A week after the accident the dead were buried in Crowsfoot churchyard. Mr Vivian read the beautiful Burial Service, amid the sobs of the mourners who thronged the green peaceful little spot.

Griselda and Mabel Romaine, escorted by Hal, Hugh Blunt, and Mervyn Bray, went amongst the mourners, trying to comfort them. Griselda, Mabel, Hugh, and Mervyn Bray were sufficiently composed ; but Hal, when he passed Mrs Black's grave, and remembered the day when he, as a young boy, stood there and vowed fidelity to the quaint self-helpful little motherless child, was overcome.

When the touching service was over, he pleaded to Griselda to wait for him. So Griselda stood bravely at the church-

yard gate, watching the mourners depart, and then asked Mabel, as a favour, to proceed to the vicarage, where she was to have tea, and to wait for her. And Hugh, in respect to her wishes, offered his arm to the bright gentle girl, telling Bray to follow. Griselda fancied she would find Hal at her mother's grave, and she was not wrong. He had thrown himself upon the grass a few yards away. It was a soft, sunny autumn day. A robin was singing, perched on a twig of the hedge close by. The dead leaves lay among the graves. It was not a day for happy hopes or bright thoughts—rather for humble faith and staunch, good resolves.

Hal rose as he saw her coming.

‘Do you remember?’ he asked, leading her gently to the spot where, years

ago, they stood together. 'What would she have thought of a calamity like this? It would have broken her heart!'

'Oh no!' said Griselda, with sudden fervour. 'She would have seen it in the right light. She used to tell me, when the death-bell tolled, that the gardener of heaven had seen a plant here fit to bloom above, and had transplanted it. She said that none ever went who were not fit to go.'

'No, that is just it,' said Hal. 'Oh, Griselda, since that awful night I have felt so bad—so worthless—yet I am no worse than I was.' Then he went on, pleading for himself, begging, entreating her that their lives should be joined, that he might grow pure and self-sacrificing by and through her.

'You know,' she softly said, 'that I

am willing. But your mother must wish such a thing—ay, and tell my father so—before there can be any real talk of my being your wife.’

‘But, this granted, you would take me, Griselda?’ he asked, with more spirit. ‘You—beautiful, good—would take what Death and the devil seem to despise?’

‘That is not like you,’ said Griselda, devotion—love—fervour in her great violet eyes. ‘But, Hal, you don’t thrive out of the sunshine! Oh, I thought that long ago; and I used to think that perhaps my having been accustomed to see trouble and anxiety and worry of all sorts would make up in a way for my want of beauty and family and riches—for I could plan out my life to stand between you and un-

pleasant things. But what am I talking about?' she cried, with a blush of confusion.

'You are talking like my beloved wife, Griselda,' said Hal, placing her hand on his arm. Then, silent, but with a new sense of happiness, they walked down the churchyard-path and through the lych-gate together.

After that brief talk of they two being made one, Hal said no more for many days. He had determined that the next conversation on the subject of his marriage with Griselda should be very different.





CHAPTER III.

SO Griselda became the wife of one of the 'great matches' of the county. The first time that Sir Hubert and My Lady called at the vicarage to ask for Griselda as their son's wife, they were met, much to Lady Romaine's surprise, with a curt refusal. Then came a stormy scene with Hal. He rushed off to Crowsfoot, to find Griselda and her father happy in their new hopes, and no longer obdurate.

At Crowsfoot the Vicar and his daughter were beloved; so that the

opinion of the country round was that Hal Romaine was not good enough for that pure, beautiful young girl, who seemed to live in an atmosphere of contented peace, which she carried whither she went.

Griselda's presence had seemed to many like oil on the troubled waters of their daily lives; and, while feeling that they would sorely miss her unconsciously cheering and elevating influence, the notion of 'fast Hal Romaine' as her husband was a slight shock.

Meanwhile, the idea of 'that good-looking young Romaine, who might have married anybody almost, going and marrying a nobody—a governess! No, well, some curate's daughter,' as society put it, gave quite another sort of shock to the titled dowagers and

eligible daughters, who amused themselves, especially those who were likely to be guests of Sir Hubert and Lady Romaine, in planning how to bring the interloper, Griselda, to discomfiture when only they had the chance.

Of course Hal had carried his point. His father and mother came to the vicarage a second time, and asked almost humbly for Griselda's hand. This time the Vicar did not allow himself the grim amusement of refusing her ladyship, but was as amiable as if he had forgotten all the wrongs and slights endured by the orphan—the waif, John Black, and had been the acknowledged son of the great Professor Blackett and in possession of a comfortable income all his life.

‘Of course, one's knowing who he is,

and being the son of a celebrated man, ready and able to settle a decent sum upon his daughter, and all that, makes a considerable difference,' Lady Romaine acknowledged to her son, while trying to 'look at the best side of things.' 'And the man really seems more civilised now that he knows who he is. It must be very uncomfortable indeed not to know who you are. Then, you see, I will say Griselda managed that sensibly—he is all right with his bishop. The affair is not the same in any way. Only one thing I must insist upon. We must introduce the marriage to society in a clerical light.'

It was of no use for Hal impatiently to anathematise 'society,' and to say he wanted no society but Griselda's, and chosen friends, who talked sense, *et*

cætera. Lady Romaine shook her head, and said that, as she had yielded so much, it would be unjust if she were not allowed to arrange the wedding.

Hal, finding Griselda anxious to please his mother in any way, acquiesced, but with an ill grace.

They were married on Christmas Eve, Griselda's birthday. Only a few were at the church. The weather fell in with Lady Romaine's plans. Snow lay on the ground. The steeple caught a few flakes, which fell rustling upon the ivy-clad church wall as the bishop, who had offered to marry Griselda, read the Marriage Service in his well-pitched sonorous voice.

Within, it was, as Lady Romaine whispered to the bishop's wife, 'an ideal wedding.' The sun shone through the

great window, illumining the wreaths of holly mingled with white flowers that hung above the Communion-table and just tenderly touching the bishop's silvery hair before it fell upon the slim figure of Griselda in her simple white gown, with lilies upon her breast,—and upon her light veil, which fell back.

‘It certainly is pretty,’ whispered back the bishop's wife. ‘She looks so saintly in that halo of sunshine. Like that picture—the Christian Martyr—a girl floating in the water, you know.’

Lady Romaine thought the word ‘martyr’ singularly inapplicable; but she only smiled sympathetically, for she greatly counted upon this worthy lady's help to launch Griselda upon ‘society’ in a strong clerical light.

There was Dean Trevor, a dapper

priest, whose chapel in Belgravia was thronged whenever he preached, assisting the bishop and a neighbouring rector to marry Griselda. The dean's sister and the neighbouring rector's daughter were two of the four bridesmaids—the remaining two being Hal's sisters, Lydia and Mabel. The four were in white cashmere, trimmed with swansdown. But it was the clergy and their wives that Lady Romaine relied upon. She felt that the John Blackett who stood there, a noble figure, had never looked so well as when he placed Griselda's hand in Hal's—giving her away to her handsome son. Lady Romaine shed just one tear about Hal, who, with his handsome face, somewhat pale, his lips compressed, stood there in his splendid uniform—‘being sacrificed,’ as his mother thought.

The little congregation felt somehow that this bridegroom and bride were much in earnest. This was a marriage rather than a wedding; Griselda was very serious. She dimly felt that there were far more dangerous rocks ahead than she had encountered in her maiden life, hard though this had been.

And Hal? Why was he to all appearance more impressed than he had been perhaps ever before?

He had never loved Griselda better than when she came to him at the altar, leaning on her tall father's arm, followed by her bridesmaids. He had given her an elated, passionate glance as they were marshalled before the bishop by the old clerk, who had been interested in the babe so strangely born in the snow, and had little dreamt that the

old-fashioned, demure little child who used to toddle so quaintly into church and climb into her place in the vicarage pew would ever be made a great lady of thus.

Yes, Hal had never felt more tender, more loving, than now. But, in the middle of the service a sudden thought—or was it an indescribable sensation?—chilled, startled him.

It was as if some other than himself had repeated that solemn oath after the good bishop—as if some mocking, derisive voice had uttered the words—‘to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.’

Death—till death!

Nevermore the old freedom—never-

more the acting upon impulses as they arose—always another self to think of—and although that self was Griselda—

‘Good heavens! I never realised it!’ he thought. Little wonder that he was so *distract*, as he led Griselda into the vestry, that, when he was called upon to sign the register, he stood, bewildered, pen in hand—wondering what this meant.

Griselda, receiving her congratulations, and trying not to hear Lady Romaine’s asides—‘Such a sweet, good child! We are so thankful Hal will have such a wife,’ *et cætera*—saw a look on Hal’s face she had never seen before.

To her the marriage service had simply meant blessing upon and grace to fulfil all her resolutions, since she knew she was to marry the man she loved. Her experience of life had taught her to expect

but little joy, and that—marred. She watched Hal anxiously. She was anxious—for him. Then she caught Hugh Blunt's eyes gazing on her with an indescribable expression.

She did not stop to wonder what Hugh's expression meant. She went to him.

‘Could you hasten our carriage, do you think?’ she said pleadingly. ‘I shall be glad to get away, you know, and my husband too.’

‘Your carriage shall be here in half a minute,’ said Hugh, seizing his hat and going out, as he went through the church thinking ‘Good heavens! what a beginning!’

He had watched Hal's emotion, and had—such keenness of perception seemed to have formed out of his great love for Griselda—had almost read his thoughts.

‘Let us go, Hal,’ said Griselda to her pale young husband, who looked bewildered. ‘The carriage is there. I shall be so glad to be out of the bustle, you know.’

Here Hugh Blunt returned, announced that the bride and bridegroom’s carriage waited, then gave a hint aside to Hal to offer his arm to his wife.

Many brides would have been overwhelmed by such a bridegroom. But Griselda took his arm smilingly, went down the aisle with happy glances right and left, nodded to the village folk hurrahing outside, and bowed and smiled till the carriage was fairly out of Crowsfoot parish.

Then she threw up her veil and took her husband’s hand.

‘Darling,’ she said, ‘I see what it is—

you did not count the cost! You have been more generous than just in your love for me! But do not think I will be a burden to you. It will not be ordinary husband and wife with us! Do you think I shall interfere with you? I am yours. I will obey you—to the death—unless conscience forbids me.'

She looked so lovely, so faithful! Hal took her in his arms, and kissed her passionately—he hardly knew his own feelings. They seemed all bitter remorse and wild love—yet those meaning words—'till death'—rang in his ears.

'Griselda,' he said, almost fiercely, 'you are too good for me, and I know it now—too late, too late! I never realised; here I have vowed myself till death—death—how am I to keep myself at that—that pitch of perfection? Why, I

should have laughed *at* my giving my word to Heaven like that to scorn, till I—till I—knew we were to be man and wife!’ he went on, with a crimson blush. ‘Yet I have sworn, and I feel wretched, for I seem to be at your mercy, and how can I change so utterly. Who—who—will help me?’

‘I will,’ said Griselda, with a lovely glance of her sweet eyes. ‘Hal—my husband;’ she nestled close to her strange bridegroom as if he had been the least selfish and most chivalrous being—‘don’t fear! If you will come to me, I will do anything, anything—that is right.’

Hal kissed her forehead.

‘Oh, if only you were not so pure, so good, that it seems a sacrilege, almost, to take you into the world!’ he said. ‘I fancy it is my feeling about your unworld-

liness which overwhelms me,' he went on. 'Still, you can go into the world, through the world, and remain unspotted, my adored,' he said, raising the corner of her veil and kissing it. 'My love,' somehow he could not bring himself to say 'my wife, I am glad we chose Paris for our honeymoon. I fancy Parisian life may bring our tastes more together.'

Then he described the life of visitors to the continental capital, till they drove into the park of Feather's Court, under the triumphal evergreen arch, and through the snowy slopes where tenants and villagers cheered and waved handkerchiefs; then there was no more serious talk. For there were the Feather's Court lacqueys in new gay liveries and glistening silk stockings, opening the great door of the white mansion, and maids, with

favours in their pretty high caps, peeping from among the banks of plants in the hall. Feather's Court looked its best to-day, the white stone terraces decorated with evergreens in green pots — flags waving from Venetian masts erected on the slopes in the park. The turf was all green and white patches — the snow quickly melting under the bright winter morning sun.

Griselda smiled and nodded to the assembled servants, as she blushing ascended the wide staircase leading to the drawing-rooms, on her husband's arm.

‘It seems so unreal,’ she said to him. ‘Just like when you stepped down into the orchard in your green velvet suit all those years ago.’

She looked with a certain awe at the

magnificent staircase hung with great pictures — old sea-fights, solemn-looking portraits of men in armour, and grandly-dressed women with long taper fingers and slim waists. How would she ever live here and be a great lady?

This item in her marriage-bond had not occurred to her.

Hal thought she looked lovely, and felt pacified as they entered the drawing-room, where there were huge fires, and the warm atmosphere was impregnated with the odours of stephanotis and other white waxen hot-house blooms in the vases.

‘Come, and let us have a look at you, before all these nuisances arrive,’ he said, drawing her before one of the long mirrors, ‘Bother! If there are not two carriages—the bridesmaids and the men, of course, racing along the drive—do you see? It would

serve them right if the horses went down. Look, Griselda !' he went on, his arm around her, as they stood before the glass.

Griselda glanced timidly at the reflection of her handsome husband. She seemed to herself to look absolutely insignificant by his side.

'I don't like you so well in your uniform, Hal,' she said. 'I liked your grey suit ; I remember how I used to put my cheek against your arm.'

She sighed. He took her in his arms and kissed her, and had hardly settled the folds of her veil before the bridesmaids came in, followed by Hugh Blunt and Mervyn Bray ; a staid major—the only military friend Hal chose to invite to the clerical wedding—and—the young Dean Trevor, who was enchanted with the bride.

'Upon my word, you are to be con-

gratulated, my boy,' he said to Hal, while the bridesmaids bravely smothered those little jealousies bridesmaids will feel, and hovered prettily about the bride ; ' there is something so Una-like about Mrs Romaine. Don't start'—he laid his hand on Hal's arm. ' I suppose I am lucky enough to be the first to call the bride by her married name ? Yes ! Do you know that, while assisting our good bishop, I could not help feeling as if this were the profession of a nun, rather than the joining of a man and woman in the bonds of matrimony ? If I am not utterly wrong, there is something peculiarly saintly about Mrs Romaine, Hal. By the way, the bishop and Lady Romaine wish me to propose your healths—the bishop hates speeches. And you know, though I am not old, so to say'—he ran his fingers through his pre-

maturely grey hair with a satisfied smile—I remember you all since I can remember anything.'

'Propose everybody all in a lump—propose any mortal thing,' said Hal, who was irritably fidgeting with his uniform; 'only, dean, don't propose that my wife is a saint. I don't want to be laughed at;' and he walked away.

The dean looked after him with a strange expression of pity. Then he shook his head, and stood up smilingly as the rest of the wedding-party came in.

Lady Romaine, looking handsome in her lilac satin and purple velvet, went about presiding and grouping her guests, and settling everything like a fashionable Juno. She had heard someone say that Griselda ought to be painted by the great portrait-painter, Rogers. And an-

other — Lady Romaine forgot whom ; but, whoever it might be, he or she was a remarkably sensible and far-seeing person — had come to her and said. ‘ Oh, Lady Romaine, how I envy your privilege of presenting your beautiful daughter-in-law ! She must be the belle of next season,’ *et cætera, et cætera*. Lady Romaine’s clerical wedding promised to be a success.

She was already so triumphant that she had failed to notice the swelling of that vein on Hal’s forehead—which meant that Hal was in what his sisters called ‘ one of his nasty tempers.’ So, after settling her guests for the few minutes’ wait before the breakfast, she went to him full of confidence, and said,—

‘ Oh, my dear boy, we are so fortunate ! The dear dean will give us one of his eloquent speeches. Of course it will be re-

ported in the newspapers. All the dean says is reported—I don't know how or why ; but it is so. Then Griselda—she is really quite a success ! Every one thinks her so like a saint.'

Lady Romaine stopped short. Hal had muttered something between his teeth that she had frequently heard him mutter, and which was like the low preliminary growl of a coming thunderstorm.

'Look here, mother !' he said, with the old threatening gleam in his eyes. 'I've always heard a man's wedding-day is the worst in his life ; don't you help to prove the saying in my case.' And he turned away and began to talk to his former tutor, now a middle-aged clergyman in possession of a fruitful vine and many olive branches, who had begun smiling—nervously and doubtfully,—when

he arrived, and was still smiling—to conceal how his doubts had already grown. Poor Mr Withers! He had seen rage in his former pupil's face, and made a desperate effort to say something pleasant. He talked of the bride's sweetness and goodness, of how thankful he was for Hal that he had been directed in his choice of a wife.

‘You will no longer be tormented by your old wild fancies, my dear Mr Romaine,’ he said, dropping the familiar ‘Hal,’ now that this tempestuous Mr Romaine had arrived at the dignity of being a married man. ‘If you could have seen the grief and affection of the Crowsfoot parishioners when Mrs Romaine drove away! It was like the old tales of the people clinging to a departing saint.’

‘Beg your pardon, Withers; I am

wanted.' Hal rushed off. 'If they would only call her a she-devil, I believe I should prefer it,' he said, as he went to his wife, who was not looking after him, but was seated on an ottoman, calmly conversing, as if she had grown there to talk and be talked to.

John Blackett was standing near to his child. He tried not to look depressed for her sake. But of late she had seemed so to supply her mother's place—it was very hard, this parting. He, too, began to realise what this marriage meant for him—for her—for Hal.

'We must not have you gloomy, Mr Blackett,' said Lady Romaine, in a high contralto voice, pitched that all might hear. 'Your dear daughter will soon return. We—indeed, society cannot spare her. Ah, if only her distinguished grand-

father, the famous professor, could have lived to be here to-day!’

It was well that breakfast was announced, and that Lady Romaine, who had got through the programme of her preprandial behaviour in the drawing-room—always somewhat of a difficult time at weddings—did not, as she stood and fanned herself, waiting to follow her guests, see the face of John Blackett, of the bride’s father.

Almost a passion of wrath arose within him at this coarse mention of the facts of his life most sacred to him. He—who had hardly schooled himself yet to think of the father who turned his back upon him when he was born, that father who had persistently shunned him and disclaimed him, and had salved his conscience by *post-mortem* gifts—to have his parent-

age flung vulgarly in his face by his old enemy, Lady Romaine!

He calmed himself for Griselda's sake ; so did Hal, as far as he could. So the wedding-banquet went off to Lady Romaine's satisfaction.

The white tables, with the gold plate and glass centre-piece, all graceful forms, showed well against the polished walls. Griselda cut her cake with perfect composure, and was only amused when a huge piece of hard sugar tumbled into her lap. It was all a fairy tale—a bright dream to her. To-morrow, she thought, with a saddened smile, she might awake to a long life of difficulties. At least to-day she might be as happy as she pleased!

The dean's speech put the finishing touch to Lady Romaine's content. It was brief and graceful. He began by a

short history of his acquaintance with Hal, putting his best points in the most favourable light. He said truthfully that the bridegroom had that gift of all gifts, a good heart. His friend once, you were his friend always. And he even believed, personally, that a friend under a cloud was dearer to Henry Romaine than the friend who was basking in the hot sunshine of success. He could speak from personal experience. For, although he had seen comparatively little of Henry Romaine since he himself had been a successful man — therefore a busy man, whose real friends made a point of respecting the value of his time—there had been years, not so very long ago, when, but for to-day's bridegroom and his timely help, he might have died in a miserable lodging for want of actual warmth and

food. No doubt many could tell a similar tale, with Henry Romaine as its hero, and would, if they only knew, say, to-day, as heartily as he did—God bless him! Not only that; but these would join him in congratulations at having so soon met with so sweet a lady as the bride, as his companion and helpmeet through life. None, after a glance at Mrs Henry Romaine, could but feel that in this cold, hard world her husband had found a blossom in the snow. Of course all present knew how this lovely lady, whose health on this her marriage-day it was his privilege to propose, had bloomed in the snow one Christmas-eve; not a bright Christmas-eve like this, but in the midst of a cruel hurricane, a fearful storm. And no doubt that many who were present would draw a curious parallel, and would scarcely won-

der that a babe, born in a stable, although without visible protecting angels, and born at this holy time, might be destined to be so gentle, so patient, that the almost worshipping affection of her father's parishioners which he had seen to-day would be a matter of course. He concluded by an allusion to the beautiful name of *Griselda*, and mentioned his confident hope that in no single instance would this *Griselda's* fate be like her celebrated namesake's, so quaintly told by the father of English poetry. No; he might say that, just as Henry Romaine had been so fortunate as to find a rare blossom—say, the *Edelweiss*—on his upward path of manly life, so he would wear it upon his heart till death, to find it again in the gardens of Paradise.

Although successful, Dean Trevor had made the wedding party feel much as if

they had returned to church. However, the bridesmaids and Lady Romaine soon retired to help Griselda dress for her journey; and there were the chirps of admiration over the travelling dress, which was of shaded grey velvet trimmed with white fur.

‘It has been perfect!’ said Lady Romaine, as she warmly embraced her ‘Edelweiss,’ as she intended to nickname her daughter-in-law. ‘Simply perfect! Mind, love, you must come back much sooner than Hal intends to. You must assert yourself. You must not put up with his tempers. You must begin as you mean to go on. See how I manage Sir Hubert! It is your duty to manage Hal—imitate me.’

‘Don’t frighten her, mother,’ said Lydia compassionately.

‘When you have had enough of his tempers you come home to us. Union is strength,’ said Mabel, who was busily buttoning Griselda’s gloves, while the other bridesmaids were actively collecting the satin slippers to be thrown after the happy pair.

Meanwhile Hal was storming at his valet in the gun-room, where several items of luggage had been placed *pro tem*. Hugh Blunt heard; and, biting his lips as he remembered that this man was now lord and master of the girl whom he believed to be the one and only love of his life, he went into the gun-room to see if he could coax Mr Romaine into a less irritable frame of mind.

‘Oh, it is you, lucky fellow, come to gloat over me, plunged into all this bother!’ said Hal, viciously kicking at a

portmanteau. 'Go. No, thanks; you can't help me. Who can help a man who has made a fool of himself?'

The passionate outburst had barely left his lips before he turned, and saw Griselda.

Hugh Blunt paled, and stepped aside. What he felt he could not have told; it was indescribable.

Hal flushed to the roots of his hair when he saw his young wife. Had she overheard? Had she 'thought anything?' Oh no! Impossible; she looked cheerful, bright, in her slate-coloured velvets and white furs, like a sunshiny winter landscape.

But she had heard; his speech had seemed to stab her heart. Only she used her gift of self-command. She had not to be warned by Lady Romaine and her

sisters-in-law of what she might expect. One day, not very long ago, she had told herself that she knew Hal better than he knew himself.

‘Good-bye,’ she said, turning to Hugh Blunt, with her gloved hand outstretched.

What was it—the look in her eyes—that told him she knew, or suspected, the life she was boldly embarking upon?

He could not tell. But added to his old love for her came a great respect, a wonder at one so weak, who could be so strong.

Then came the embracings and parting words, and the waving of handkerchiefs, as the carriage with the four greys drove off. One of the leaders shied at a satin slipper that flew upon his nose, but the bride and bridegroom soon vanished from view behind the great trees in the snowy park, to meet their fate.



CHAPTER IV.



T was not an ordinary honeymoon.

Griselda saw that Hal was already repenting his coolness and irritability. She had silently forgiven him in advance. They had barely driven out of the park, the white turrets of Feather's Court were still in sight, when she clasped one of his hands in both hers, and said,—

‘ Oh, Hal, you are good to me—to leave all this, and take me, such a poor companion! I have crossed the sea, but never

stayed near it. And I have so longed, so dreamed of the great, green, surging water, and the sense of being cut off from foreign nations by those roaring waves—it seems impossible that in a few hours I shall be there.’

‘And tossing about on those roaring waves,’ said Hal,—recovering himself as he thought, ‘She can’t have overheard that speech of mine.’—‘For we must cross to-night. I can’t stand those English watering-places.’

However, when they reached Dover, Griselda’s innocent delight at the towering cliffs crowned by the old castle, with the great waves foaming as they rolled in upon the beach, made Hal change his mind. They stayed at Dover two, three days — bright winter days, which were landmarks in Griselda’s life. It hardly

seemed like Christmas Day, dining alone in the half-empty hotel. But their host and the servants made much of them, and Hal's state of mind was marvellous to himself.

‘Wonders will never cease,’ he thought to himself, as he and Griselda fought their way against a brisk sea-breeze, laughing, and battling with the wind, like two children. ‘I to be amused, to be made happy by this sort of thing! Griselda is a witch.’

She was intensely devoted all through that short winter day. But, during their sea-side rambling, fresh visitors had arrived at the hotel; to *his* dismay, he read the names of General and Lady Hermione Grayburgh on piles of luggage that were being carried into the hall.

Griselda ran upstairs quickly ; the wind had tousled her hair, she felt untidy, and on the first landing knocked up against a tall lady in brown velvet, who abashed her with a surprised glance from a pair of superb black eyes. If—as Griselda went on to her room, where her new maid had been expecting her, and had a warm gown and slippers ready—she could have guessed how that haughty dame would make her suffer, even that very day !

For Hal had been petted and spoiled by Lady Hermione, General Grayburgh's young and beautiful wife. He had been always 'hanging about the house' till lately. And since then Lady Hermione had drooped somewhat, and on Hal's marriage-day her physician had told the General that her ladyship required change

of scene immediately, and he must really think of wintering abroad.

All Hal's good humour fled at the sight of those names. 'The question is—what to do?' he thought, as he went into the empty billiard-room and paced about, gazing absently at the maps, at the railway guides, at the stands of cues. 'Can't start to-night in this beastly gale. Besides, there is something cowardly in flying from her. She can't say anything against me. No; the best thing is to stay and face it out. Surely I have a right to marry when and how I please, just the same as any other fellow!'

So he went to Griselda, who was sitting before her fire in her blue wrapper, while Marshall, the maid, was brushing all her long, fair hair, and asked her to dress and go into their drawing-room.

‘Some people I know are here,’ he said nonchalantly,—‘General and Lady Hermione Grayburgh. I must call in and see them, and they will return the visit, I suppose.’

Griselda assured him she would be ready; and he went off and called upon the General and his wife—a visit of mockery, he felt, but necessary; and he and Lady Hermione laughed and chatted, and the General tried to make some ponderous jokes; then the three adjourned to Hal’s apartments, where Griselda met them at the drawing-room door, and welcomed her husband’s friends with a gentle dignity which made Lady Hermione hate her with a cold, deadly hate there and then.

Lady Hermione saw a girl dressed as a young matron, in an exquisite costume

Lady Romaine had ordered specially for Griselda from Paris. This was a rich, green satin *polonaise*, embroidered with sprigs of jasmine, the prettiest of striped green and white silk.

‘Perfect taste!’ savagely thought the friend that had liked Hal Romaine not wisely, but too well. Then her eyes travelled upward to the fair oval face, with its gentle dignified expression, but with a certain anxiety in the lovely eyes.

‘Some little school girl!’ she thought, with a rush of satisfaction at the thought that at least she was superior to Hal’s wife. ‘Some entanglement—some freak, no doubt! Poor Hal!’

She held out her hand and shook Griselda’s with an affection of warmth. Then she turned her languid dark eyes

upon Hal, and, with a little silvery laugh, said,—

‘ I don’t think I was ever so surprised in my life ! To think of the charming little girl I ran up against in the passage this morning being the wife of my old friend Hal ! It seems incredible. Do you know, Mrs Romaine, I looked after you with envy, thinking, ‘ Ah, youth on the prow, pleasure at the helm ! There goes a child who is not weary and heart-sick, because she does not know the world. The Dead Sea apples and the bitter dregs are to come. Ah, Hal, you have a heavy responsibility ! Who would have thought that you, who have lived through so many hot noons of life, would dream of stealing a flower fresh with morning dew ? ’

She had assumed a graceful, half-tired

attitude on a *causeuse* near the uncomfortable elbow-chair on which Griselda had somewhat stiffly seated herself. Griselda gazed on this beautiful lady, who spoke with such ease and grace that her speech sounded like Greek verse—with dismay. Was this being, who reminded her of a picture on a Bordeaux plum-box Hugh Blunt had given her one Christmas, an Oriental beauty reclining on a divan, some bird with a long chain gracefully perched on her wrist,—a specimen of the women Hal had known—whom she was to supplant?

The old General, who liked pretty young girls, luckily came to the rescue. He did not quite understand his wife—never had. But he knew when her sweetly-modulated voice meant mischief

for then she spoke more slowly, more like a well-practised chime of bells. And he did not see why my lady should flout that pretty young bride. So he got up and stamped about a bit; then, getting rather red in the face, he slapped Romney on the back.

‘I tell you what, my boy,’ he said in his blunt way, ‘I usedn’t to think much of you when you were hanging about at my lady’s kettledrums; I set you down with the rest of the dawdlers. But, ’pon my honour, I see you’re a man of sense, and the very first time I can do you and your young madam a service, I’ll do it—by Jove, I will! Now you two come and dine with us to-night, and talk it over—eh, my lady?’

‘My lady,’ whose eyes had met Hal’s with an old look which appealed, ‘See

how I am unappreciated by this savage!' was languidly charmed. She thought of a certain toilette she had, and of how fortunate it was that she had ordered a Broadwood to be sent into their rooms—she had played more since she had 'lost Hal,' as she called it.

'I have played so much of your favourite music since you cut us,' she said to him with a meaning glance. And I made a bargain with the General that I should find a piano wherever we stayed. Of course you play, Mrs Romaine?'

'The organ—a little,' said Griselda with a pang. This was worse and worse. As she went to the door and watched Lady Hermione gliding gracefully along the corridor, Hal bending over her, and the white-haired General,

with his gold-headed stick, stumping along in the rear, she remembered a saying which struck her very much—was it Hugh Blunt's?—‘Fighting itself is of no good without an intimate knowledge of the foe.’

‘And I’—she stopped short, dismayed—‘oh, what will come of it all?’ thought poor Griselda.





CHAPTER V.

CRISELDA stood in the hotel drawing-room, gazing blankly at the huge conventional furniture. All—from the glittering chandeliers pendant from the heavy ceiling to the handsomely decorated walls, with a few well-known prints hanging here and there, seemed so desolate—so unhomelike. The rising gale shrieked and howled without; the big windows, well-secured as seaside palatial hotel-windows usually are, attempted a faint rattle. The coal-fire in the big steel grate, which had burnt

low, shivered and collapsed, while a gust of smoke blew across the fire-guard into the room. Absently twisting her wedding - ring and the pearl circlet Hal had given her as 'keeper,' she vaguely felt that the even flow of the honeymoon had been checked since this meeting with the kindly old General and his beautiful young wife, Lady Hermione. Those dark eyes—those pencilled brows! Griselda had seen the eloquent glance, half-sad, half-sympathetic, of those dark orbs when they were fixed upon Hal. Did every woman, would every woman—look at her husband like that? 'They must have been great, great friends,' Griselda thought, looking vaguely, with a new pain, longing, fear of she knew not what, at the prints on the walls—'Against the Tide,' a young couple in

a boat, who had evidently had a disagreeable discussion and were struggling up-stream, and 'With the Tide,' where all, the lovers and their surroundings, seemed sunshine and peace. Then she caught sight of her travelling-desk, her father's gift.

'Hal will stop some time at their rooms, I daresay,' she thought, with a sinking heart. 'I will write to father.'

She opened the desk. In the bustle of the wedding and the packing, Griselda had had no time to unlock and examine John Blackett's wedding-gift to his daughter. As she looked over the desk now, she was deeply touched to find that all her little tastes as a scribe were not only known to, but had been carefully remembered by, her father. The pens she had found the readiest, the writing-

paper, most of the materials she had used in preference as his amanuensis, were there to hand, and—that which she seized almost with eager passion—a letter, the superscription ‘For Griselda.’

She tore it open with trembling fingers. What would be his parting counsel? Her father had said but little to her that wedding-morn, a few days back, which already seemed weeks—no—months ago!

‘Griselda,’ John Blackett had written ‘I wonder when you will find this? Not in your happiest moments, my child, I expect. Whenever it may be, think first that, although separated from your father, to whom you are naturally the dearest on earth, that earthly separation is a mere term; it is actually but a waiting for our

near meeting. I am here, ready, when you want me. Now a few words about your present life. I did not wish to croak, like an old raven, when you were on the threshold of your young happiness. And pray do not take this as a croak. But I must warn you of that which is most young married people's stumbling-block—the expecting too much from each other. To live at a high pitch of any sort is difficult, and, in point of fact, unnatural. Do not fancy that a yawn or a short silence means bore, or the first symptom of a man's being tired of his wife. Only a man dislikes a chain as much as that nobler animal, the dog.—Ever your father, JOHN BLACKETT.'

Griselda almost smiled. How like her father, as he had been, since his life-bur-

dens had been lifted from his weary shoulders!

She seized a sheet of note-paper and wrote—

‘FATHER,—It is useless to add anything to the word which means the nearest, holiest tie, is it not? I have just found your dear letter. I will not say whether it came at a moment of difficulty; but it certainly strengthened me and reminded me of—’

‘My duty,’ she would have written. But the pen slipped from her fingers.

Hal had kicked open the door, which was ajar, and stood there, looking disgustedly at the smoke which was gracefully floating in grey clouds just below the ceiling.

‘What the deuce do they mean by this sort of thing?’ he said, with suppressed anger. ‘Fire out too! Why didn’t you ring?’ Then he rang, and going to the window, muttered something barely audible, which sent the blood to Griselda’s cheeks, about ‘unlucky devil,’ etc.

‘What do you mean by this?’ he thundered at the waiter who had flown in answer to No. 20’s noisy summons. ‘Putting me into a room poisoned with smoke! Bring me my bill and serve luncheon at once. I cross by the next boat.’

The startled waiter expostulated, murmuring something about ‘blowing great guns’ and ‘cone being hoisted.’

‘Do what I say, d’ye hear? And send my valet.’

The waiter flew.

‘See your maid, my dear, tell her to

pack, and change to your travelling-gown at once, will you ? ’

The thin veil of assumed tenderness hurt Griselda more than if he had stormed at her.

‘ But—Hal—I thought—those people—asked us to dinner—and you accepted—’

Hal, strolling about the room, his hands in his pockets, laughed. It was a nasty laugh. It meant much, and Griselda winced.

‘ My dearest child, you will, of course, have to write an excuse. You cannot possibly go into society till you have seen something of the world and have had a little training from my mother. I love your simplicity, dear,’ he added more kindly. ‘ Of course, you don’t understand ; but you will by-and-by. Come—you are writing—just put that aside and write a note I will dictate to you.’

Griselda obediently laid aside the half-covered sheet, and began—according to Hal's dictation—

‘ Dear Lady Hermione—’

She looked up. It seemed rather strange to address the regal lady of the almond eyes thus; but of course Hal knew, so it must be all right.

‘ Write your own bold manuscript hand, said Hal. Then he dictated, ‘ I am so sorry, but I have just received a telegram from my father.’

Griselda glanced up. ‘ Oh, Hal,’ she said, ‘ have you had one?’

Hal stamped his foot impatiently. This was too silly!

‘ Of course not,’ he said. ‘ Don’t you understand? I have been racking my brains how to get off without offending the General and Lady Hermione, and

that is the only excuse I could possibly think of.'

'But it is not true. I will write anything you like that is true ; but not a lie, Hal.'

'Griselda !'—Hal checked an unkind speech ; but he felt choked with rage. The beautiful Lady Hermione, who, in days not so very long ago, had played upon his sentiments, his whole nature, as a consummate artist plays upon an intricate musical instrument, had asserted her supremacy, had overturned the simple, almost childish joys of these first days of dual solitude with his girlish wife. He had felt, as Lady Hermione clasped his hand and glanced one of her old glances straight into his eyes, that his safety was in flight—not only his safety, but his loyalty to Griselda. It enraged him that Griselda should be an obstacle,

when he was trying his best for her sake.

‘Then, if your conscience is so extremely sensitive,’ he said, in a strange constrained voice, ‘you must really find your own excuses. What is that?’

He saw Mr Blackett’s letter lying half-open on the table, and would have seized it ; but Griselda put her hand firmly down upon the paper.

‘That is a letter from my father,’ she said ; ‘I found it in the desk—here.’

‘I thought there should be no secrets between husband and wife.’

Hal’s anger was at its height. But, being at a white heat, he seemed calm.

‘I do not know whether he intended anyone else to read it,’ pleaded Griselda, looking earnestly at her husband.

‘Curious, for a clergyman, who is sup-

posed to consider man and wife as one !’

‘Read my reply,’ said Griselda eagerly.

Hal took the sheet, and, as he read, an ugly sneer spread itself about his mobile mouth.

‘Thank you,’ he said drily. ‘I compliment you on your duplicity either to myself or to your father. Yesterday, I was your best beloved, according to your own saying. To-day, because, as I am forced to believe, you are meanly jealous of one of the queens of society, the reason being that I paid her the ordinary attentions she is accustomed to,—your father — is — what ?’ — he consulted the note. ‘Pah ! Romantic stuff ! Tear it up ! And please tear up that you began to Lady Hermione. I will explain matters myself.’

Here his valet, successor to poor Chan-

cell, who was killed in the eventful railway accident, came in; but Hal left Griselda, giving his orders as he went towards Lady Hermione's rooms.

He found her reclining in a shady corner. She started as he came in. All her old passion had rushed back—she had been dreaming of bygone happy hours never to return. Her eyes were tearful.

‘The General is—in his room,’ she stammered.

He was softened by her emotion. She looked so gentle, so womanly; and Hal's excitement led him to feel an atmosphere of love about this siren, who had formerly held him in chains, and who had behaved, he thought, at this crisis, with great gentleness and magnanimity to her escaped captive.

‘I wanted to speak to you,’ he said falteringly, with some new emotion he

hardly understood. 'May I—may I sit by you, as in the old'—he paused and sighed—'the old days?'

She looked at him almost fearfully. Then she bowed her head, and said, 'Yes'—the sort of 'yes' which is given to some great, some vital question, rather than the careless 'yes' of ordinary life.

He sat down on a basket-chair by her sofa. There was a bowl of hot-house blooms on a tiny table beside him, a tiger-skin at his feet. Lady Hermione travelled with accessories—indispensable accessories, as she considered them. Hal felt the difference between this room and his own—one so well arranged, so refined, the other bare, cold, smoky—acutely. 'I have come,' he began. Then he hesitated, and the blood rushed to his forehead. He leaned forward, clasping his hands, dumb.

‘ You have come ! ’ gently repeated Lady Hermione.

‘ To tell you that I have changed my plans. I shall cross this afternoon. ’ One moment’s silence.

‘ In this gale ? ’ asked Lady Hermione ; and her voice trembled. She was bitterly disappointed. She believed that to-night she might have gone far to re-establish the old friendship.

‘ Can you not understand that it is better for me ? ’

In his new anger with Griselda he spoke almost with passion to this old love, who, although almost his superior in worldly position, and most certainly far above him in intellect, as women’s intellects go, had never ‘ defied ’ him, as he chose to think his young wife had done on the subject of her father’s letter.

‘As you will. You know, Hal, I have always thought you have acted for the best. But, will you leave me, now, at once?’ she went on, suddenly rising from her sofa, and holding out her delicate white hands with an imploring gaze. ‘For Heaven’s sake, go!’

Hal rose, agitated. What? There were great tears in those large dark eyes that he had seen look so coldly upon the world, so scornfully upon gay crowds of adulators, so adoringly into his own.

For a few seconds they looked steadily at each other; and the past, that delirium of Hal’s, when he gave rein to impulse, and had recklessly followed the promptings of the moment—when he hung about Lady Hermione, and no day passed without that delicious talk, and those half-confidences, half-suggestions, and whole

long silences which mean more than words or looks—the memory of those days passed through the minds of both, as they saw a procession of the thoughts, words, actions, and incidents of their lives review themselves rapidly before those who are near unto death.

Lady Hermione was not a bad woman, and her affection for Hal had been the strongest sentiment of her life. And Hal? Fiercely, bitterly he remembered his doubts, his sudden terror, when he had realised that he was bound to gentle, innocent Griselda for life. Unthinking, he had drifted to his fate, and here he suddenly found himself, on one side Scylla, on the other Charybdis.

‘Good-bye,’ he said—merely the one word; but the anguish in his tone was balm to Lady Hermione’s disappointment.

‘Do be happy!’ she earnestly said. ‘If I only know you are happy, my dear boy, I do not care what becomes of me!’

‘Happy!’ said Hal, dropping her hands; and, with head bent, walking respectfully from her presence, as if she were a princess. Formerly, when he was the spoilt darling, coming in and going out of the ‘gem of a town residence’ in Mayfair when and how he pleased, he had given himself airs there as he did in his home, nettling Lady Hermione somewhat, although she did not choose to show it. Now she had become unattainable, an impossibility — therefore, to Hal, inexpressibly desirable.

‘Happy!’ he savagely repeated to himself with a Byronic bitterness as he went downstairs to calm himself with a cigar.

‘What evil chance brought me to Griselda that day at Cologne, again in London, again after that accident! What a fate for us both—utterly unsuited to each other! Poor child, poor child!’

While Lady Hermione had stood motionless where Hal had left her.

‘I used to think him gloriously handsome,’ she mused; but never, never have I imagined him as now—the ideal of a fallen angel or Manfred. Well, I have nothing to blame myself for!’

She went to the great mirror over the mantelpiece and gazed at her own beauty. In the light of the great fire—the sky was darkening with folds of dismal clouds, and the flames half lit the room—she saw that, if the freshness of youth were no longer there, there was a grander, more imposing splendour about her pathetic face and

moulded figure, which might be compared to Griselda's peaceful loveliness as a storm in a pine-forest, with lurid gleams between the thunder-shower, to a lily-pond in green fields under a smiling spring sky.

‘Perhaps,’ she thought. Then, after one more glance, a triumphant expression brightened her eyes.

‘Not perhaps,’ she thought, remembering some news her husband, General Grayburgh, had read to her that very morning from the leading daily paper. ‘Let them go honeymooning like little Cupids among the roses—poor child, should I grudge her her day? He has caused her trouble enough, I know! But it will be soon over. And then—’

She stepped across the room and opened

the window. This new idea oppressed her. She wanted air, light.

‘Then,’ she went on to herself, gazing out on the green, angry sea—‘then my turn will come! I think I can afford to wait.’





CHAPTER VI.

HOW little did Griselda—as she struggled on board the packet bound for Calais, chilled, depressed, for her three days' bridegroom had been, at the best, morose, since the unfortunate meeting with his old friends—think how and by what she would be befriended!

The afternoon sky was leaden, the sea a dark blackish green, which, as the waves seemed as if they had suddenly begun civil war and were fighting furiously among themselves, had an ominous deadly look, like the green of some poisonous

plants. The wind seemed to blow from all quarters at once, not as one wind, but many. There was the great sea-breeze, which seemed to rush with a gigantic rush steadily through and beside and below and above every obstruction, and sweep landwards with a calm contempt of earth. But there were also wandering gusts that shrieked and wailed on their own account, and icy little breezes that went about rapidly, biting the nerves and hissing into the ears like air-snakes, while they froze fingers, toes, and crept under wraps to stab where and how they could.

Roar, rage on the sea, screech, whistle in the sky—no wonder the rattling and shouting, as the heaving little black packet was loaded by the struggling porters and sailors as best they could, was lost in the noise of the hurricane! The captain,

whose hoarse shouts from the paddle-box where he stood were barely heard, stared to see an English gentleman with a delicate young girl on his arm struggling across the deck. He leaned down and called to Hal as he passed,—

‘If it weren’t for the mails, we shouldn’t go, sir, and we may have to put back.’

‘All right!’ shouted Hal in return; then he went with Griselda and Marshall, her maid, to the cabin. Leaving them to the stewardess, who looked sulky, for, if there had been no lady passengers, she could have braved the dirty ‘weather’ more comfortably.

‘They say it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good, Griselda,’ was Hal’s temporary farewell. ‘Let’s hope we are the nobodies.’

Were they? At all events, this gale

was Griselda's friend. For they tumbled about the Channel for four mortal hours. Four hours of physical torture to Hal, who, though he supposed himself a good sailor, found himself prostrate and wishing that his valet—who was prostrate also—or the steward, or the captain, or anybody—would throw him overboard.

Every woman he knew, including Griselda and Lady Hermione, might have died before his smarting eyes would have turned to look at them. The gale and the sea had come to Griselda's rescue. She had sat calmly while the boat reeled to Calais on the waves like some rudderless, helpless cockle-shell—bathing her maid's head with eau de Cologne, and comforting some crying children whose mother was 'down' in an opposite berth, while she was the envy

of the sour stewardess, who said she 'couldn't do nothing for no one, having that pain in her head on these awful journeys, when ladies who choose to take the risk must really expect to look after themselves.'

It came to her rescue, for it sobered Hal, and sharply but decisively cured his capricious fit of romance. When they were in harbour, and Griselda met him on deck leaning dejectedly upon the steward's arm, she seemed like a special mercy, standing there so straight and fresh and smiling and ready, she was the only member of the four capable of action. She it was who helped the polite officers of the 'Douane' in their examination of the luggage. She hailed close conveyances to drive to the station; and when her limp charges had struggled aimlessly

into the warm, bright refreshment-room, where all was so neat,—well-dressed French barmaids smiling in the freshest of costumes behind the buffets, joyous-looking French waiters rushing about in a superior but sympathetic manner,—it was she who enlisted one of the waiters with a timely tip, and supplied both her lord and master and their servants with hot *bouillon* and tiny glasses of French brandy.

‘You are a born nurse, Griselda,’ was Hal’s speech of acknowledgment as they took their seats in the railway carriage.

‘If that engine would only stop screeching and whistling!’ he added pettishly.

Yes, that prosaic and painful crossing seemed to have snapped the link between Hal and his friend Lady Hermione

Grayburgh. She was in the past. And in some way, as the train rattled through the snowy landscape ornamented with rows of blackened skeletons of trees, Hal felt that she was done with, over, that he was in a new mood—perhaps not an agreeable one; still, the future, dreary as it might prove to be, could not possibly contain the being who but a few hours ago seemed to him almost the central figure of his whole life.

‘How should it?’ he thought. ‘We are not likely to meet again. No; that dream that fluctuated between the delights of the haschish-drinker and the fiendish illusions of the victims of *delirium tremens* is past, as the mere dream that it was.’

The new, rational Hal Romaine chose a quiet hotel, and settled himself and his

young wife in Paris in a deliberate, calculating way.

‘We shall stay two or three months,’ he told Griselda. ‘As soon as you have seen the sights and are accustomed to the gaiety and everything, I will look up my old friends, the Duchess de M—, the Comtesse B—, Madame de S—. French ladies have such extraordinary *savoir faire*. And from the very contrast between you, with your English nature, and they, I believe you might become quite an acquired taste in Parisian *salons*. After that, my mother would find your introduction to English society a comparative easy matter.’

Griselda scarcely understood. But, since she had seen Lady Hermione, the old feeling she had in childhood, when she made her first appearance at Feather’s

Court, that she and those who peopled the world in which Hal lived were utterly different,—was strengthened.

‘I must change,’ she told herself. But how to accomplish this? The old habit of thinking deeply and continually was simply unconquerable. She made a constant and vigorous effort to throw herself out of herself, as it were—to forget that she was Griselda Romaine, born Griselda Black, or rather Blackett—and to be merely a spectator, a pleased and gratified spectator of these new scenes, just as Hal seemed to be.

Yes; Hal was no longer the stormy lover, and was past settling down into a kind but imperious husband, sometimes passionate, at other times petulant, given to short ebullitions of rage when matters went wrong, or the letters from

England did not please him, but taking a larger view of life and a more vivid interest in his surroundings, and, in Griselda's opinion, far more adorable, if that could be possible, than ever.

Of late—this was after they had spent a month in Paris—she was beginning to feel a greater respect for the handsome husband, who could scarcely show himself on the Boulevards, or in theatres and restaurants, without being admiringly stared at. Why this was she could not tell. She used to nurse the idea in her mind with a new satisfaction, tenderness, hope, particularly when she was alone, and Hal had gone for a walk; of late she had felt so much fatigue that she was glad that Hal let her off expeditions and sight-seeings.

She had visited the theatres gravely.

This wondering gravity and her blushing face, when Hal took her to see those pieces which are *piquant* to the Parisian temperament, first annoyed, then amused him and flattered his vanity. For he soon noticed that the volatile French treated Griselda with a strange respect. Some felt reminded of the 'Sainte Vierge,' by her modest bearing and gentle face. Others glanced at Hal, and—why they hardly knew—were filled with chivalry on behalf of the '*petite dame Anglaise.*' To Griselda Frenchmen seemed all Bayards, and Frenchwomen smiling sisters. It puzzled her.

Two months, and Paris suddenly flung aside her white mantle of ice, the cold mist lifted, and she blossomed into spring. Flowers appeared in balconies, bouquets of early violets and lilac-bloom and

orange-blossom from the south scented the florists' shops; white parasols and coloured awnings defied a burning spring sun on the Boulevards. Hal took his wife to the supreme Parisian artist in costumes. He had already called on his titled friends, who had returned his visit, paying their respects to Griselda at the same time, and invitation-cards lay on Griselda's writing-table—accepted.

The handsome middle-aged Duchesse d'A— had perhaps been most charmed with Griselda. She had always liked Hal; but Griselda won her enthusiasm. She burst into eulogy of his bride to Hal, as he gave her his arm to her carriage after her visit.

‘Ah, Monsieur de Romain,’ she said, with an eloquent look, as she was seated in her carriage and he lingered at the

door, 'your fortune is made with a *petite femme* that is like some dream that one has in church when the choir sings and the organ plays! I am an old woman; I know it, so I may say what my heart says. You should no more think of *bonnes fortunes*. You possess a diamond. Look no more upon Palais Royal paste!'

'What do they all mean?' Hal asked himself. He soon found out.

Griselda, at the Duchesse's *soirée*, was a *furore*. French tact would not allow this fact to be obtrusively apparent. But, while the men, congregating as they will in Parisian drawing-rooms in corners, in the withdrawing-room—the bolder in the outskirts of the principal reception-room where the ladies sit, sometimes demurely, and always with a certain coquettishness, on the

sofas, divans, arm - chairs — eyed the fair bride with a certain shyness, and the few who were introduced bowed, made a few complimentary remarks, and departed quickly — the ladies were charmed, delighted. At parting, young girls curtsied and blushingly held their foreheads to be kissed, and many of the married ladies embraced her—or rather kissed her—on both cheeks.

As for the Duchesse, whose sharp eyes had frequently been fixed on the ‘*belle dame* of Monsieur de Romain,’—despite her many duties—she conducted Griselda to her bedchamber, a stately apartment, which might have been a modern imitation of the royal bed-chambers at Hampton Court—and there became sweetly maternal in her manner.

‘*Charmante enfant!*’ she said effusively.

‘And with so handsome a *petit mari* !
But’ — then she laid her exquisitely
gloved hand lightly on Griselda’s shoulder
— ‘where is *madame votre mère* ?’

Actual tears glistened in her eyes
when she found that the young wife was
motherless. She exacted a promise that
Griselda would come to her often,
very often.

Griselda was pleased to do so. She
instinctively felt that this good old
French lady was — or certainly might
be — a friend in need.

During the month that followed she
was much with the Duchesse. It was
an exciting month. Hal was roused —
perhaps he had never been so roused,
as by the accounts in his *Times* of the
outbreak in India, the first alarm of
the terrible mutiny.

‘We are sure to be ordered out,’ he said one afternoon, when the Duchesse was taking a cup of English tea with Griselda at the hotel. ‘It is inevitable. For my part, I thirst to be at those black fiends as if I were a blood-hound!’

Griselda dropped her teaspoon. She was pale.

‘Monsieur de Romain,’ said the Duchesse somewhat solemnly, as Hal escorted her down the wide staircase shortly after, ‘you must pardon me. I am *grandmère*! But, if you say about these creatures so terribly, these Indians of your *belle Angleterre* who like her not — why — your *petite dame ravissante* may die! You may kill not only this sweet wife, who loves you to distraction, but—’

She paused, and looked him straight

in the eyes. '*Vous comprenez ?*' she said meaningly.

'*Merci, madame ;*' and Hal stooped and kissed her hand.

'*C'est bien alors,*' said the Duchesse. And as she drove off, she felt she had done her duty.

And Hal remained where he was—bareheaded as he was—dazed, confused, and, yes — why, he hardly knew — horrified !





CHAPTER VII.



MOST lives seem to begin with a faint prophecy of their progress and end. Childhood is the keynote, telling of the scale which must follow. Griselda was born in a barn, in the snow—an exceptional birth. She was an exceptional child, girl, woman, who would seem destined to an exceptional fate.

It was scarcely an ordinary marriage, this of hers, the simple daughter of a country parson, with Henry Romaine, heir to a baronetcy, to wealth, to land.

Her honeymoon was disturbed by a ghost from her husband's past unscrupulous life. Then came a sudden elevation. That three months in Paris, in the sunshine and gaiety, petted, admired, almost warmed into a new outburst of fresh young life by the sympathy of the buoyant, butterfly natures of Hal Romaine's French acquaintances, was a brief exquisite dream, destined to end in a gloomy, even terrible awakening.

One day they were about to drive to the 'Bois.' Hal, in his faultless British morning-dress—which was the envy of the Parisian dandies, already in love as they were with English tailoring—was strolling carelessly down the grand staircase to smoke a cigarette before the carriage came, when a telegram was handed to him.

He felt a momentary thrill. Although the news from India was ambiguous and, to say the least of it, threatening, he had been reassured by the ease with which his extension of furlough had been granted. He did not dream that good old General Grayburgh, knowing that the regiment was bound to be ordered out sooner or later, had made intercession at head-quarters for him, thinking it 'hard lines' for the handsome young pair to be separated so soon, so cruelly, but inevitably. So that his thoughts flew, first, homewards. His father, Sir Hubert? Griselda's father? His mother? What was it?

He went into the dining-saloon, which was a desert of white tables, and opened the telegram.

As he read, he staggered, paled, and sank in a chair, stunned.

Recalled — at once — regiment under sailing-orders for India!

He clenched and crumpled the paper. Then he groaned. His head fell upon his breast, his clutch loosened, and the flimsy messenger of ill-tidings dropped flutteringly to the floor, where a soft spring breezelet from the open window caught and played with it in a sunbeam, as if in mockery.

Then he started,—

‘*Ou est Monsieur Romaine ?*’ Griselda’s sweet, girlish voice—that had a new resonance born of this joyous, careless life—without!

He heard some one tell her as he rose stiffly to his feet, ground his teeth, and, seizing a carafe of water, poured out a glassful and swallowed it. Then he faced her, as she gently pushed open

the door and stood there half-shyly, waiting for Hal's approval of a pale green velvet costume which he had chosen for her.

How divinely fair she looked in her beautiful dress, the very embodiment of happy well-being,—with a faint blush on her exquisite skin, a half-smile on her lips, as she buttoned her gloves! She was looking down, so she did not see her husband's deadly pallor — his agitation.

‘Charming—a greater success than I expected!’ he said, forcing his voice. ‘Come—there is the carriage!’

‘You are in a hurry,’ said she, laughing. She felt supremely happy this golden spring day. ‘I haven't half finished those dreadful buttons. What is that paper?’ she added, looking back

as she went out. 'It looks like a bank-note.'

'As far as I know, I am not in the habit of dropping bank-notes about,' said Hal, as he put her into the carriage. 'But I'll go and see.'

He went back and secured the telegram. Chilled, unnerved, he stood uncovered, tears in his eyes—and prayed—a short swift prayer—that his wife, his good angel, might be spared.

He well knew how and in what way she loved him. He could not tell whether she had the faintest suspicion of impending separation, suspense, and perhaps the agony of loss. And, as for that warning of his good friend, the Duchesse d'A—, it had seemed to him, though he had dared to approach the subject once or twice—as if it would

be unseemly that Griselda should be awakened from a happy present to a serious future, however sacred and beautiful now, by him, at this terrible crisis, which might end in her early widowhood.

No ; those tenderest, holiest confidences between husband and wife must remain hidden within his heart, while he must deal the blow, and acquaint Griselda with coming contingencies, as if by accident. For a mental shock given carelessly and seemingly without intention, falls, perhaps, less heavily than one driven home by force of will.

They drove along the gay boulevards, the sun brightening the lively scene. It might have been an Oriental city, so gorgeous were the crimsons and yellows and greens of the shop - awnings, so

brilliant the dazzling jewels in the velvet-lined shop-fronts, and the display of decorated baskets and ingenious surprise *bonbonnières* in the windows, where glistening sweets, fragrant chocolate, and *marrons glacés* tempted the pretty little walking dolls, the Parisian children.

The motley pedestrians—first, the men who thought themselves models of elegance with their tiny waists and long twisted moustaches, their glossy boots, tightly-gloved hands, and accessories of cane tucked under arm, cigar in mouth, and curly-brimmed hat perched on one side; then the decorous ladies, accompanied by children and *bonnes* in neat white caps, carrying market-baskets or children's playthings; and the pretty impertinent grisettes, or the red-faced *ouvriers* in their blouses—most of these

not only glanced at Griselda as she drove by, but stayed and stared after her with the appreciative French stare, a thing of itself quite apart from all other stares prevalent in all other cities.

Hal saw, and was gratified even in his new passion of grief—boyish grief. A glance at Griselda, so placidly sweet and smiling, and he was perilously near a convulsive sobbing-fit. He roused his courage. But speak to her, here, now? It was impossible!

Suddenly he rose, knelt on the opposite seat, and ordered the coachman to drive into the country. He wanted to go to some village—any pretty village where Madame might see a farm and wood, if possible—some village where one might almost forget Paris, if one could.

The coachman, after some pondering, decided upon his route, and informed Hal with a certain gravity that he would do his best. Then, as Hal resumed his seat, the man whipped up his horses and drove on at a rattling pace.

‘My dear—whatever is he doing?’

Griselda, clutching her husband, looked alarmed.

‘Only driving a little faster,’ said Hal reassuringly. But his spirits sank as he saw Griselda pale, her eyes very blue, and a scared expression on her delicate face.

‘I don’t know what can have come to me,’ she said, with a faint blush of shame, as she caught sight of her husband’s anxious eyes. ‘Hal, Paris seems to have transformed me. All my old pluck has gone. I used to think

nothing of holding a child when Doctor Mayne operated; or to thread the needles if he had to sew up a cut; I never seemed to think anything but that I was doing a necessary duty—but now! Oh, Marshall brought me the paper—I was in bed—she said something about some atrocity in India—oh, Hal, I am not fit to be a soldier's wife! I— Can you forgive me? I fainted.'

Her words simply roused Hal to desperation. Now the state of desperation, which is not despair—not recklessness, not a negative, foolish kicking against the pricks—is a sensation greatly underrated. For in an unreal state of excitement it is the friend in need—it tides over bad minutes, it bridges over the gulf of absolute hopelessness as no

other feeling possible to humanity could.

The desperate are cold, hard as ice. They seem callous. They think and talk as wisely, perhaps more wisely, than they ever did in their whole lives before. No one suspects their wretched, most wretched state.

When Hal heard his wife, in her utter innocence, wondering at her own weakness,—he could have groaned aloud. But desperation helped him to behave as wisely as any ancient sage.

‘My darling!’ he said, turning a radiant, if slightly haggard, face upon her, ‘I can explain all you feel, as, unselfish as you are, you would not think of doing to yourself. You are so bound to Crowsfoot! Your whole being resents your lengthened absence. Well,

we will return at once, before we are ordered off to India.'

His hands clasped hers. He looked away at the road into which the barouche had just turned — a road so narrow that the ungainly weeds in the ditch on Hal's side swept the carriage-wheels. Rising from his stooping position, he took one of her hands and patted it to the time of a tune he was whistling. He did not look at her.

A greyness crept over her beautiful earnest face, a horror darkened her eyes. One instant showed her her fate. She did not see the young spring green of the hedges and the budding trees—she saw a sloping country where white fortresses with many strange-looking domes towered above the Eastern buildings, above the tropical foliage that drooped in

the lurid heat under the cloudless coppery sky. Not only this, she saw men in Indian uniform struggling in hand-to-hand fight, a few of the British cavalry dashing hither and thither, sabre-ing right, left, front ; she saw black heads falling among fountain-spirts of blood.

Then the moment's agony passed, and with strained aching eyes she saw the quiet French country again.

‘I thought that this summons would come very soon, my dearest,’ she said, clasping her husband's arm. ‘And it has found you ready. Oh, my Hal, how proud I am to see you so calm ! Why, I never for one instant imagined you had been sent for !’

Half Hal's anguish drifted away before Griselda's composure, as he listened to her tender voice.

‘My brave darling,’ he said, turning towards her with passionate admiration,— ‘my true wife, how I pity all those poor fellows out there who are fighting to rescue a lot of frivolous dolls who are all very well in times of peace! Oh, yes, I know some of the women have behaved wonderfully! Still—still—there is only one Griselda in the world!’

Perhaps there had never been such perfect accord, or never would be again in this world, between those two wedded lovers, hitherto basking in the sunshine of life, but now suddenly confronted by a horrible future—as there was to-day in that little French village. The people at the inn fell in love with the young English couple, especially after the *cocher* talked enthusiastically to the landlord of his *jeune capitaine*, who, his valet

had said, must go with his brothers-in-arms to be cut to pieces by the black devils that L'Angleterre had been *folle* enough to adopt. Madame—a fat good-natured mother of the night-capped brood of little children, who were jabbering as they played with stones in the gutter under the bar-window—made an excuse to go into the parlour where the handsome young monsieur and madame were resting. This excuse was to propose they should dine before returning to Paris. In reality she had never dreamt that such ‘quality’ would accept her homely fare.

She was astonished when Griselda looked pleadingly at Hal, and he consented in a sort of royal bantering way, as a king out hunting might accept some peasant’s fare. Then afterwards

she stole out and watched them walking slowly towards the wood.

It was horrible to think of that *jeune homme magnifique* to be killed—chopped up, the *cocher* had said. And that sweet *petite dame*! If perchance—

The good woman glanced at the little night - capped heads bobbing about—sighed, and shook her head.

And Hal and Griselda wandered into the young woods, he watching the green lights play upon her soft green velvet dress and upon her delicate face, with the sad lingering gaze of one who takes leave of some beautiful object he may never see again, while Griselda, with her old frankness, spoke out freely, and tried to coax Hal to discuss the situation. She could not quite understand his taciturnity. Little wonder, for in speaking of the

journey out, and the perils of the Indian campaign, she plainly showed that she intended to be at his side even unto death.

And he—he dared not take her.

Yet there was still the remote chance that the good old—Hal thought of her now as meddling—*duchesse* might have surmised wrongly. While his own observation told him she had not,—he clung to the forlorn hope that even with her large experience she had for once made an error of judgment,—as the drowning clutch at the straws.

‘Hal,’ said Griselda at last, ‘my love, I think you joyous temperaments get dreadful reactions. You are as “down” as a man can be. Now I, so dull, so quiet not only feel entirely hopeful, but’—here she paused, and, raising her eyes to the

sky, her face had a glorified expression — ‘I feel that although we may have cruel trials, all will be well at last. Something tells me so. I seem to hear a voice that says, “Peace! All is mine.”’

Her strong faith influenced Hal. He cast off his forebodings, and was happy with the provisional happiness of one who enjoys a short respite before the inevitable fight.

They wandered about, hand in hand; and, to Griselda’s delight, they found some field-flowers, and also a clearing, with the felled trunks lying here and there, not so unlike the memorable clearing at Goarshausen where she and Hal were lovers for the first time. This led to talk of those days which to both seemed ages back in the long past. Charming talk—those confessions of how Griselda thought and dreamt of and

longed for Hal, almost without knowing it; of how Hal was a very demon with one idea—Griselda.

‘You have had such a power over me, my love, that I believe, if I had to kill our worst foe over there, and just as I was about to strike he shouted “Griselda,” my arm would fall to my side and he would be spared.’

Griselda sighed. To her all killing was murder; and it would be long before she could think of her husband as a slayer of his kind without a shudder.

They had their simple dinner at the *auberge*. Then they drove back to Paris, clinging to each other like children, and, like children, dreaming so little of the coming hideous episodes in their joint lives that, when they slept, they smiled unconsciously in their happy dreams.

While Hal and Griselda were wandering in the woods around Paris, the news that Captain Romaine—for Hal had his promotion—was ordered to India with his regiment, had arrived at Feather's Court. It seemed such a glorious day, as if no pain, trouble, or dread could triumph where nature was rejoicing in her yearly rejuvenation. The sun shone on the great stone mansion in the park. Birds sang loudly in the shrubberies, heavy white blossoms were struggling into full bloom on the chestnuts, and a warm spring wind played with the nodding tulips in the Italian gardens, and carried the heavy perfume of hyacinths into the great drawing-room, where the long windows were opened to admit the scented air.

Without, all so fresh, so joyous ; within,

a scene of excited lamentation. Lady Romaine had resolutely thrust from her mind all doubts or fears as to Hal's being sent to India. She had chosen to be an optimist in regard to the Mutiny. If any dared to suggest that the evil was deep rooted, had grown silently but steadily till it was as a mortal cancer, its branches reaching from end to end of England's great dependency, she smiled disdainfully. Therefore, when terrible accounts of new uprisings, fresh rebellions of native regiments, and outrages too atrocious to relate arrived day after day—her false hopes fled, and she sank into a nervous, unhinged state of miserable foreboding.

Then came the deadly blow. Her adored Hal was summoned. At first she was as a mad woman, rushing from room to room, tearing her hair, screaming.

Lydia had to pacify Sir Hubert, who, in his helpless paralytic state, only half understood what was going on. Mabel sent off to Crowsfoot for Doctor Mayne and Mr Blackett.

John Blackett was deeply impressed by the news of Hal's summons to the seat of war. A thoughtful man, he foresaw greater evils to come before peace could be restored, a peace bought by the sacrifice of many promising and noble lives, by the wreck of many English homes.

‘Don't be so lugubrious, man!’ said the little Doctor, as he drove his old friend, the parson, to the Court. ‘That young fellow'll pull through safe enough, and out there he will learn a lesson or two that'll be a shower bath to any Don Juan nonsense that may be left in him.

Besides, absence from Griselda will teach him the value of his jewel.'

'But, Griselda?' said the Vicar doubtful. 'Do you think for one instant she will not insist upon sharing his danger?'

'Blackett!' burst out the Doctor. 'Oh, these philosophers, these extraordinary thinkers! Shadow of Swift, all honour to you for your satire of the Laputans! Griselda to accompany her husband! Well, I suppose there is some common-sense left about somewhere, though this mismanagement in India wouldn't lead one to think so.'

'The Doctor felt enraged almost for a few moments after Mr Blackett had spoken, wondering whether he could have heard aright. 'Women going out with their husbands to meet those infuriated hordes, indeed,' he thought.

‘I tell you what, Blackett,’ he said, kindly but decidedly, after they had driven into the park, ‘I am a neutral. Nor has much learning made me mad. If Griselda dreams of going with Hal, I will use heaven and earth to prevent it, that’s all.’

John Blackett was in a meek humour, and allowed Doctor Mayne to mildly bully him. It was well that he was meek, and that the Doctor effervesced somewhat before spending a day at Feather’s Court. For if ever two men were harried and worried, it was they. Not till within an hour of the expected arrival of Hal and Griselda did Lady Romaine make any attempt at self-command, and the house seemed all in confusion—servants going aimlessly here and there, the maids collecting in corners to gossip, and apparently no rooms being prepared for Mr and Mrs Romaine.

The Doctor came into the great hall about seven o'clock with an air of relief. At least, the day was over. John Blackett was leaning against the hall door, looking through a side-window. Mabel, in a white gown, and Lydia, wearing a pretty dinner-dress, stood silently by.

'It is near the time,' said Lydia mournfully.

'Then where is your mother?' asked the Doctor imperiously.

Lydia said she could not possibly come down, of course. She would see Hal alone first.

'Will she?' asked Doctor Mayne, going off upstairs, agile as a youth.

'Doctor Mayne is very impetuous to-day,' said Lydia dismally. Both girls stared, when, a few minutes afterwards, their mother came down the broad stair-

case, leaning on his arm. The Doctor had been impetuous to some purpose.

‘There is the carriage,’ said Doctor Mayne. ‘Come, come, let us try and receive the bride and bridegroom as if we were glad to see them.’

Men-servants drew back the solid oaken doors. The brougham drove up to the foot of the wide steps, its lamps yellow against the fading crimson of the sky. Then a lithe active figure sprang out, waved his hand, helped a lady to alight, and both came buoyantly up to the entrance.

The lamplight gleamed upon the two bright glowing faces. There was an air of delighted triumph about Hal, as he lifted Griselda’s veil and said,—

‘Don’t kiss her all at once;’ and no one, glancing at the young wife, would

have believed that a tinge of sadness could be veiled by that sweet joyousness of manner as Griselda embraced her father, Lady Romaine, and her sisters-in-law, with almost equal ardour.

‘Mother, I hope dinner is ready; we are ferociously hungry—we die of hunger, as the French say,’ said Hal, throwing aside his travelling-cloak. ‘Make haste, darling; never mind dressing,’ he called after Griselda, who was going up-stairs arm in arm with Mabel.

The two had brought an atmosphere of vivid happy life into lugubrious Feather’s Court. John Blackett smiled, Doctor Mayne was cheerily sarcastic, and Lady Romaine felt slightly ashamed of her undignified abandonment to a possible grief.

Dinner passed off pleasantly. Hal

was gay, Griselda smiled. 'I had no idea she was so beautiful,' whispered Mabel to Doctor Mayne.

'Nor I, until to-day,' he answered, in a significant tone. He had not lived a life of perpetual observation and deduction therefrom for nothing; and he saw that this young couple were meeting their fate as simply and cheerfully as all people should—'only they don't, or won't,' he added to himself.

Next morning came important letters, followed by a special messenger, Hal was closeted for some time with him in the library, while Lady Romaine wandered from the drawing-room to her boudoir, unable to keep still under this ordeal to her impatient nature. Lydia and Mabel went to Griselda's sitting-room, which commanded a fine view of

the park and the blue hills beyond. They had heard from their maid that Marshall, Mrs Romaine's maid, was almost as much at her wit's end about starting for India without 'a proper outfit, which couldn't—do what you might—be got, all in a hurry—at least for a lady like Mrs. Romaine,' as about starting for India at all.

The sisters found Griselda sitting in an easy-chair in a delicate grey morning-wrapper, busy with some lacework.

She looked up with a grave smile as they entered.

'Why,' Mabel burst out, 'we expected to find you and Marshall up to your ears in *confections*, and here you are, doing lacework as if you were to be a fixture, instead of going thousands and thousands of miles away!'

Lydia admired the work. Griselda was transferring some old Brussels sprigs that had belonged to her mother.

‘But these long veils are not worn now,’ Lydia added, half inquiringly, with a keen glance at her sister-in-law. An idea had struck her, for quiet Lydia could observe when she chose. ‘I think I understand the situation,’ she thought, just as Mabel said,—

‘Whatever are you to do about an outfit, Griselda? Of course you have lots of pretty things. But you don’t want them—you will want woollens, and silk underthings, and solar topees, whatever those may be, and white umbrellas—’

‘We could see to those being sent after you, dear,’ said Lydia. ‘Shall we go to London for you to-day and get enough things for your journey?’

Griselda laid aside her work, and, putting her slender hands on Lydia's shoulders, looked up into her eyes with a look which Lydia—who had a heart beating with a touch of Romaine passion beneath her quiet exterior—never forgot. There was a depth of anguish, appealing love, and desperate patience she had seen but once before—in the eyes of a pet spaniel who was struggling in the agonies of death.

At that moment the door opened, and Hal came in, pale, agitated. He did not look at his wife ; but, after a few commonplaces, he sent his sisters away.

‘I will come to mother presently,’ he said, as he opened the door for them ; and they went out, scared and subdued.

He locked and bolted the door, went to Griselda, and, kneeling down beside

her, encircled her with his arms, his face hidden upon her shoulder. His teeth chattered, his whole body trembled convulsively.

‘My own,’ he said, ‘I feel as if I were dying.’

Griselda soothed and comforted him. She gave him a cordial that the kind old duchess had given her at parting, as a precious secret restorative which would reanimate when all others failed. Then she drew a low tabouret to his side, and said,—

‘Do not worry about me, darling! I know—I guess—you leave to-day. But I am prepared for it! Before we left Paris, I knew that I must not go with you.’

He started, flushed, then drew her sweet, blushing face to him and kissed

her, while a passionate prayer went up from his soul to Heaven that his wild youth might be forgiven for the sake of wife—and child.

That night he went, calmly and bravely. Griselda's hopes had been a consolation to Lady Romaine, and Mr Blackett blamed himself for not feeling so sorry as he ought when Hal drove off in the brougham, waving his *adieux*, till the clump of trees hid the carriage from view.

‘She will be quite as well without him,’ he thought, as he supported Griselda to her room, followed by Lady Romaine, who was struggling for composure. ‘There, I believe, he will distinguish himself and forget his foppishness. Here he would have sickened of sweet indolence, and might have fallen back into his old ways.’

Poor father, with his *réchauffé* of worldly wisdom, with his human arguments, his human short-sightedness!

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For a time all went well at Feather's Court. Griselda was cheerful. Lady Romaine was as fussy and devoted to her Hal's young wife as she had been to her Hal himself.

'I am leading such a white-satin life,' Griselda told her father one day, when she was accompanying him through the shrubberies, 'that I shall be fit for nothing by-and-by. As for my patience, that you used to say was my only good point—don't shake your head, father, you know you did—there seems nothing to try it. It will wither and disappear from actual disuse.'

'Wait—wait, my dearest child,' said

the Vicar. He knew how cautiously all the Indian news was investigated before Griselda was allowed to see the newspapers, how many white lies which he would have scorned to tell were placidly coined by Lady Romaine in her daughter-in-law's behalf. Griselda had had but one letter from Hal, a few lines written hurriedly on the voyage when they signalled a vessel homeward bound,—

‘DARLING WIFE—DEAR MOTHER,—A chance to send a line by passing ship. All well, and as jolly as sand-boys. Concerts, plays—there are some sharp fellows in our ranks, I can tell you! We have had some pretty hot weather; but our medico says I stand it splendidly, and am in glorious trim for wholesale execution of those “brigands,” as

the Parisians call them. Oh, my Griselda, how are you? Keep happy, for my sake. And, mother, I feel doubly about you—and father—and all—since—well, let Griselda finish the sentence! Fancy, when I come back to you, covered with glory, *minus* a leg, perhaps, or with an empty sleeve—but what matters that? Colonel, or nothing!—that's my war-cry.' (Here came a word black with ink-erasure). 'Excuse that blotted word. It was "deuce," I think. The gong sounded for letters to be handed in. *Au revoir*—*au revoir*, my own wife and all dear ones,

HAL.'

After this brisk, boyish scribble, 'so like Hal,' as his woman-kind said, with wistful fondness, came blank, unbroken silence. News had come of the mutiny

at Lucknow, of the recapture of Allahabad. Horrible, sickening accounts of the massacres and mutilations of English mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, had fired the anger of every British man. Civilians longed to join their military brethren in exterminating the human wild beasts who used their gift of reason to invent devilries beyond and above even the hell-torments imagined by the painter Fra Angelico. England's blood was white-hot in her veins, as perhaps it had never been,—and, by God's help,—will never be again.

Then came the awful tale of Cawnpore, read throughout the land with pale horror, told with bated breath. England, that memorable day, seemed crushed, as if ready to sink into a merciful sea which would drown her woes.

Lady Romaine read, aghast. But a sudden spirit seemed to animate her. Her boy—well, he was doubtless in danger, and evidently cut off by the enemy from communication with home. But in this crisis she must sink ordinary individual feelings, except her duty to her beloved son in protecting his wife—she must be an Englishwoman, calm and strong in the honourable anger which sins not.

It was well that she was nerved for a moral battle, for a few minutes after her maid came to say, as she handed her a twisted note,—

‘The Doctor and Mr Blackett, my lady, in Sir Hubert’s office; they came quite quiet-like through the stable-yard.’

How those common words brought death to her forlorn hope, stabbed her

heart! She seemed to feel her life stop, halt.

She staggered. Her maid, alarmed, got her some sal-volatile. She drank it. Then she went quickly down the back-stair, and into the office Sir Hubert used before he had his paralytic stroke.

John Blackett and Doctor Mayne stood near the window.

‘I have not read your letter, gentlemen,’ she said, almost defiantly, ‘because I know—my son is dead!’

She had spoken more than she really believed, in a sort of delirious agony. What was this? Both men were silent—Mr Blackett’s head hung upon his breast—Doctor Mayne took a step forward.

Too late! With a smothered cry, the

unhappy mother threw up her arms, then fell backwards on the polished flooring, as one dead—by Heaven's mercy, rejoining her best-beloved child, her lost Hal.





CHAPTER VIII.

DOCTOR MAYNE and Mr Blackett assisted Lady Romaine to poor Sir Hubert's great arm-chair, where he used to sit so often building castles in the air of a great future for his eldest born. How little had he dreamt that one day, so soon, his bereaved wife would lie there, insensible with grief at the news that brave, handsome Hal was dead, killed, perhaps massacred, in India!

Lady Romaine's maid had followed her mistress, and fetched restoratives so quietly,

that the household little thought what news the old postman had brought in the Feather's Court post-bag.

The unhappy mother's first cry was—
'How — oh, when — was it?' Doctor Mayne looked at Mr Blackett.

'We have the news direct from General Grayburgh,' the Vicar said, taking her trembling hand kindly between his; 'the General wrote under cover to me. Mayne, the letters, please.'

Doctor Mayne produced one of those mysterious leathern instrument-cases which his young patients held in such awe, and handed Lady Romaine a letter.

She shrunk back, crying, 'No—no—I can't see; read it.' She could not face the awful news; she covered her face with her hands.

John Blackett read, in a faltering voice,

which sounded tragical in the dead silence, as the doctor and the maid stood by as mourners stand by a grave :—

‘INDIA, *July —th*, ’57.

‘MY DEAR, GOOD LADY ROMAYNE,—Be worthy of that fine fellow, your son Hal, who has yielded his life for his country as a soldier should. I am writing to the mother of a hero, so I need not mince matters. Captain Romaine, after being slightly wounded in a skirmish, volunteered to go to the relief of Colonel S—, who was to have arrived here ten days since, and about whom we had grave misgivings. After a few days, a scout arrived with the terrible intelligence that Colonel S— had been beaten back into a native fortress, and that the reinforcement sent to his aid had been cut to pieces by the rebels. The scout had

seen the remains of Captain Romaine's company, and they arrived here yesterday with full accounts of the catastrophe. They were surprised in camp, at night, and overpowered. The account of the massacre is one on the long list which daily increases, and almost each hour brings news to add to it. I will write again, and on our return, which can scarcely be yet a while, I hope to find that the Almighty has mercifully consoled the good mother and the dear young widow of one of the most daring and brave young officers England has ever lost.—I am, yours most faithfully,

‘ THOMAS GRAYBURGH
(General in Command, etc.)

‘ *P.S.*—I have your son's watch and chain, also a ring recognised as his, found

upon a Sepoy shot later on by our returning men.'

That letter had been written by the good old General with a full heart. It was read and heard in Sir Hubert's little study at Feather's Court with a grief too deep for tears.

All but one word was listened to by Lady Romaine with a sort of incredulous stupor; and at that word 'widow,' she started; the truth came home to her.

As John Blackett read the General's message, the afterthought of poor Hal's watch and ring, she burst into passionate sobs.

'Poor soul! Let her cry,' said Doctor Mayne, almost desperately. Then going away to the window, he gazed out into the gardens, brilliant in the steady August

sunshine, and, while he unconsciously rattled the money in his pockets—a trick of his when he felt beaten by the skeleton Death—he thought back upon many bad half-hours, among them that Christmas Eve when Griselda was born in the snow, and that cruel summer night when Hal was supposed killed in the railway accident.

‘ But this beats all ! ’ he thought. ‘ Here Blackett and I have barely begun the wretched business. There’s Griselda to be told ; then we know pretty well what will follow that—’

Here he turned, arrested by the word ‘ Griselda.’

Lady Romaine, with a vague feeling she must not be unworthy of her brave, dead son, had controlled her sobs, and, rising with Mr Blackett’s support, said brokenly, but eloquently,—

‘Griselda—our—Griselda.’

Doctor Mayne, re-animated by this attempt at self-control, came briskly forward.

John Blackett proposed to break the news to his child himself.

‘No, no, that will never do,’ said the Doctor, who fully appreciated Blackett, but thought him deficient in tact. ‘Remember that Griselda is my patient, and, that we have such an ugly business before us—dangerous, too—that we want all our wits together to soften the shock.’

Then he proposed that Marshall, Griselda’s maid, should go to awaken her as usual, and that, when she had breakfasted and dressed, Doctor Mayne should fetch her, ostensibly for a consultation as to whether Mr Blackett, or Blunt, or someone, should go out to Hal, who was dangerously wounded.

John Blackett's face fell.

'I hate lies,' he said ; 'better the blow—better anything, than a lie !' He might well feel thus—he, whose life had been shrouded, banned, by the suppression of truth !

'She will guess it,' said Doctor Mayne bluntly — 'that's one comfort.' Doctor-like, his principal interest lay with his patient, who was, as it were, to undergo torture while his fingers pressed her pulse. 'Now I'll go off and find the maid—what's her name ?—Marshall, and coach her up.'

Going into the servants' quarters, the gentle clatter of breakfast preparation, the sound of cheerful voices and laughter, the Dutch picture, framed by the open kitchen door, of glowing fire and bright ranges of red copper and white tin, also

the savoury odours of peppery dishes, dominated by coffee,—struck him as incongruous.

‘Life and death elbow each other with a vengeance on this incomprehensible little globe,’ he thought, as he paced the stone passage, waiting for Marshall.

Marshall, a neat girl, with shining dark hair, came out of the still-room with Mrs Romaine’s breakfast-tray.

‘Go and put that down, there’s a good girl, and come here,’ said Doctor Mayne.

Time pressed and would not admit of ceremony.

Marshall did as she was told, and returned.

‘There is bad news from India,’ said the Doctor, in an undertone; ‘and your mistress’s life depends upon your discretion, my discretion—in fact, an incautious

word or look from anyone may spoil everything.'

Marshall paled, but looked steadily at Doctor Mayne.

'I suppose the Captain is wounded, sir.'

'Worse than that—the very worst!'

'Captain Romaine is not dead, sir? if you mean that,' said the girl calmly. 'At least I cannot believe it, and I know that Mrs Romaine will not.'

The Doctor stared. Was the girl daft? He hastened to tell her the bad news in detail. But she shook her head.

'I will tell you why I can't think but that there is some mistake, sir,' she went on. 'It is because Mrs Romaine is so set upon it that, whatever may happen to the Captain, he will get over

it. She has read all the most horrible things, and she has told me of them. But she always said at the end, with a smile, "Ought I not to be thankful, Marshall, that Captain Romaine will be spared to me?" It used to make me feel uncanny-like at first. But now I've come to believe in it, just as Mrs Romaine does herself.'

It was on the Doctor's lips to say, 'You and Mrs Romaine are a couple of idiots.' However he repressed the speech, and lectured Marshall as to her conduct. She said, 'You may depend on me, sir,' and went up-stairs with her tray, as composedly as if nothing had happened.

'Curious,' thought the Doctor, looking after her, and stroking his chin,—'very curious!' Then he went off to find

‘the girls,’ who ought to be told, or rather prepared for their brother’s loss—wondering, as he went, at the mysteries of people’s influence over one another. ‘The maternity influences Griselda, and Griselda influences that girl,’ he told himself. Still, he had an uncomfortable sensation of unreality. ‘After all, what if there were a possibility of Hal’s—’

No, no! It would not do to start forlorn hopes. As soon as he had told the girls—who seemed too crushed and stunned to be either help or hindrance—he went to Griselda’s room and knocked.

She was giving some orders to Marshall, but turned a pale grave face towards the Doctor.

‘She suspects!’ he thought. ‘She must know that the mail is in.’

She held out her hand silently. 'Good-morning, Doctor,' she said. 'Who—who is the patient?'

He reddened under her scrutinising gaze. Somehow, he felt as if in the presence of a superior power that had rebuked him for daring to take matters into his own hands.

'Lady Romaine is not very well this morning. She has sent me to ask you to come to see her in the drawing-room.' The Doctor spoke kindly, but not with his usual confidence.

'In one moment.'

Griselda went into the adjoining room. It was Hal's dressing-room. After his departure, she had locked it, and kept the key in her pocket. The room was as he had left it, the coat he had last worn thrown aside, papers strewing the

floor, a hat lying where it had fallen, trifles he had not taken standing about on the chest of drawers and mantelpiece, some cigar-ash in a tray on his writing-table, torn letters in the waste-paper basket, a glove, and a light bedroom chair fallen aside where he had last taken her in his arms for that passionate parting embrace.

This room was her chapel, where she prayed—had prayed with such prayers that Heaven seemed to open and cast down a pitiful ‘Yea’ upon her soul before it fell in prostrate agonising craving that all—all—might be taken from her, except—except her—Hal’s life.

As she stood there now, she pressed her temples tightly with her fingers. ‘There is bad news,’ she slowly thought—‘bad news; they—think—he—is—dead!’

Then a sudden horror of the possibility overwhelmed her, and her soul seemed to leap up, imploring, begging a sign from the Almighty Power.

One instant of agony—then it was as if a flood of joy was let loose, and as if everything—the very atoms in the air, the inanimate objects around, the living Nature without, basking in the sun, joined in one great ‘No!’

The effect was overpowering. She almost believed that the shout must have burst upon all ears like a thunder-clap.

‘Thank God!’ was her fervent prayer. ‘In danger—in many dangers he may be, but not—not *dead*!’

Doctor Mayne, waiting with impatient eyes fixed upon the clock, saw her coming quietly out, with a happy sun-

shiny smile playing about her lips,—and mentally groaned.

‘She does not suspect,’ he thought in dismay, as he followed her downstairs. ‘What’s to be done now? Another scene—two of them this time. That unfortunate boy was always upsetting everything when he was alive, and it doesn’t seem to be much better now it’s all over with him.’

He closed the drawing-room door after they had entered, almost in despair, thinking with professional feeling that this sort of thing must kill somebody; and he had hoped to save all parties concerned at Feather’s Court.

And Griselda? The instant she saw her father standing gloomily on the hearth-rug near to Lady Romaine, who was pale, and who crouched upon,

rather than sat on, a couch near, her head averted—she knew what had happened.

She went quickly to Lady Romaine, knelt by her, took her hand, and affectionately kissing it said,—

‘Mother, darling, the mail is a bad one, I fear.’

Lady Romaine convulsively clasped the young widow’s hands, and choked. She felt bursting, her lips trembled, her face twitched.

‘Father, I must know all about it, please,’ said Griselda firmly, putting her arm protectingly round her Hal’s mother, and looking almost sternly at John Blackett with her clear candid eyes. ‘I know you meant it kindly ; but, if any newspapers or letters came likely to shock mother, I was the proper person

to have been told first, that I might prepare her.'

Doctor Mayne scratched his head, incapable of thought. John Blackett stared first at his daughter, puzzled, bewildered, then at Doctor Mayne, whose eyes looked dull as with an opiate,—then at Lady Romaine.

'Tell her,' said she brokenly. 'Oh, my poor darling!'

'We have had our bad news direct from General Grayburgh,' said her father firmly.

'The letter, please,' was Griselda's reply, stretching out one hand.

'Oh, no, no,' sobbed Lady Romaine, clasping Griselda closer.

Griselda half-smiled, whispered some tender endearing words, and repeated her demand.

Her father glanced at Doctor Mayne.

‘You must use your own judgment,’ said the little Doctor, walking away.

John Blackett handed General Grayburgh’s letter to his child. Still kneeling, still embracing Lady Romaine, she read it—twice—thrice.

‘Is this all?’ she asked. ‘This poor, good, old man has lied—unconsciously—but this news of his is a lie.’

‘My child—think—there is more, perhaps—do not have false hopes,’ began John Blackett.

‘Hush, hush!’ said Doctor Mayne, briskly returning, having consulted with himself, and decided that this strange attitude of Griselda’s was the work of Nature, who works miracles to protect the young, and must be helped rather than discouraged. ‘Mrs Romaine is

quite right. After all, what are the proofs?’

Lady Romaine shuddered.

‘There are none,’ said Griselda, ‘And, even if there were, I should not believe Hal dead. He may be ill, suffering, in danger—but not dead. That letter is a message to me—I am to go to him.’

John Blackett gazed miserably at his daughter. Had the idea of her husband’s death disorganised her brain?

‘Humour her—it is the best thing to do,’ whispered Doctor Mayne. He thought this mood was a prelude to sudden illness.

But Griselda maintained her position, defended her opinion, not only that day, but the days that followed. And while Feather’s Court was silent as a tomb, and tears were shed openly and in secret,

while mourning was talked of, and the next occurrence expected was the arrival of a milliner to superintend the horrors of crape and the rest of the panoply of woe, Griselda and her maid were busy packing to start for India.

When it was discovered that Mrs Romaine had taken berths in the next P. & O. steamer for herself and her faithful Marshall, there was a battle of words at Feather's Court.

It was suddenly discovered that, in point of fact, no one could actually prevent Griselda from executing her wild notion.

She was legally a free agent, at liberty to go or to stay when and how she chose.

‘Legally, but not morally,’ said John Blackett tenderly, but firmly, to his daughter, who was to him a sudden pro-

blem he could not solve. He talked, argued, warned—all went for nothing.

Lady Romaine feared she was mad.

‘What to do I don’t know,’ she said, distractedly. ‘No one seems to do anything, and, if we do not keep her by force, she will carry out her suicidal mania, for that’s what it is.’

Hal was dead—yet they knew no date, they could not openly assert his death as a certainty, and the official reports merely mentioned him as killed in a sortie.

‘I’ll tell you what to do,’ Doctor Mayne said, on the eve of Griselda’s wild journey. ‘Humour her. Take her yourself, Blackett. This is merely a flash in the pan. If I am not greatly mistaken, she will not be well enough to start. If she starts, she will either be ill on board, or you will have to go on shore and remain there at

Gib or Valetta. We must prepare for the worst, but hope for the best. She is her mother's daughter with a vengeance! Only her mother dared the snow to help a fellow-creature, and she is going literally through the fire, to what? To a dead husband!'

As it seemed impossible to bring Griselda to reason, John Blackett designed to escort his daughter and her maid himself.

It was a sultry, rainy day as the three left Feather's Court. Lady Romaine was prostrate with nervous weakness in her darkened room. The girls seemed scared. The household generally was wrapped in gloom, from Sir Hubert, who was more fretful than usual, down to the dogs, who lay in corners with limp tails, only noticing the preparations for the departure by lazily opening their dulled eyes as the servants

went to and fro. When Griselda kissed her sisters-in-law and hurried to the carriage, one old hound rose, stretched himself, yawned, and, coming to the door, sniffed, and with one half-disdainful look after the carriage, retired to his mat. There was an atmosphere of unbelief in anything but the dullest misery, that Griselda had keenly felt those days of preparation—and, looking back at Feather's Court, as they drove through the great park gates, she clasped her hands, and said, with a new passion unlike her old self,—

‘At last—at last—thank God! The moments have seemed days — it seems countless ages since that morning when you all began to persist that he was dead!’

Her father sighed. Marshall, who was a little excited, starting to ‘rush into the

massacre,' as the butler, who hoped eventually to marry her, had termed it, looked eloquently at her mistress. John Blackett glanced out at the dull rainy landscape, and sighed.

But the strong faith, hope, love, that burned as a fierce fire in Griselda's soul, influenced John Blackett in spite of himself.

Once fairly started on her quest, Griselda was active, hopeful, even cheerful. She showed no trace of fatigue during the harassing day in London, followed by the railway journey. Once on board, she retired to her cabin and slept like an infant. Her father grew anxious as day followed day, as they touched at landing-stages and steamed away again, and the chances of the stoppage of Griselda's pilgrimage grew less and less. Both she and her maid seemed impervious to

changes of climate, to storms, raging seas, parching heat, scorching sun.

‘It is just as if they had charmed lives,’ the Vicar thought, as he paced the deck at night, taking his first long gaze at the much-vaunted and disappointing constellation, the Southern Cross. Then he meditated on the strangeness of the fact, that sometimes the weakest creatures brave dangers to which the strongest succumb. He felt uneasy now about himself. The ship’s surgeon had shaken his head when he detailed his unpleasant symptoms to him. The journey which had barely tired Griselda and her maid had seriously affected him. His temperature was high, his pulse raced, he could neither eat nor sleep. At Bombay he was stricken with fever, and Griselda had to leave him there with an English clergyman, an old

college-friend, and to pursue her journey alone.

It was a cruel journey. But the small band of native servants engaged for her by her father's friends were faithful through all dangers, except one.

The dangers were many. The mutiny was now so firmly established, and so cleverly hidden by Indian subtlety, that proffers of help had to be discarded throughout, lest the seeming courtesy should veil the deadliest enmity. They travelled mostly by night, Griselda in one litter, or palanquin, her maid in another. By day they rested in the shade, or in a dâk-bungalow, a small house for travellers, where they may break their journey for a while. They suffered from heat, although the cool season was just beginning. They met with dust-storms

—storms that rage with fury, bending and breaking trees, rooting up the great-leaved plants and carrying them miles, while the darkness rivals that of the blackest night. They ran the gauntlet of burning villages, of bands of infuriated Sepoys, armed with weapons that were red with British blood. One servant was bitten by a poisonous snake, and was left dying at the hut of a friendly native. But until a certain night in the jungle, when the worst danger occurred, the servants were staunch and brave in the cause of the gentle ‘mem-sahib,’ whose wonderful journeying, in her state, inspired them with a superstitious reverence.

This night all seemed going on as usual; Griselda, hushed by a peculiar chant of the men who carried her litter, was dreamily gazing at the beautiful scene she was

travelling through ; at the torchlight flickering upon the rugged stems of the giant palms, and the graceful festoons of flowering creepers flung gracefully from tree to tree ; was dreamily inhaling the warm aromatic perfume of the moist, soft earth, when her couch was suddenly let down—she heard wild yells, then found herself in the dark, alone—but not for more than a minute. She heard crashing and crunching in the jungle, then some heavy weight seemed swung over the thin roof of the litter, and, with a roar which was loud as thunder close overhead, a gigantic tiger flung himself across into the thick vegetation, and disappeared.

For a moment she felt stunned. Then she saw bobbing lights, and the terrified servants flocked back, salaaming and chattering excuses. They professed that they

knew the man-eater would fear the mem-sahib, but would kill them. Thus they saved themselves by leaving her to conquer him by her divine power.

‘After this, what next?’ wondered Griselda. She was soon to know.

The very morning after, they came upon the brow of a hill ; and, with a full heart, but without fear or evil anticipation, she saw her destination—a fortress, a white Oriental pile, pure white in the early morning air. A long low wall above the shining river was surmounted by battlements and projecting bastions. Above, the red wall of the fort was crowned with lofty towers and with pavilions of white marble, the cupolas of which seemed of burnished gold. In this dream of a building, this sudden embodiment of reminiscences of Ara-

bian tales, Griselda was to learn her fate.

Staunchly she bore up during the tedious progress to General Grayburgh's quarters. Her little band passed the outer walls, the many courtyards and groups of buildings which made the fortress almost a city in itself, and passed a great but gloomy palace of dark red stone, into a square surrounded by turreted pavilions of marble, the columns and walls inlaid with precious stones.

Here the procession halted at a doorway in a marble screen. Griselda's bearer—or chief servant of a superior caste—was just assisting her to alight, when a young officer in a shabby uniform, with his arm in a sling, came out, and stood still, staring at her in stupefied astonishment.

Griselda at once recognised the original of a photograph in one of her husband's albums. This worn, tattered-looking being was a brother officer of Hal's.

'I am Mrs Romaine,' she said hurriedly. 'Pray let me see General Grayburgh at once.'

'Oh,' said the young man, in an indescribable tone of mingled wonder, sympathy, horror, and perplexity. He had snatched off his cap with his left hand, and stood nervously twitching the fringe of his puggaree.

'The General?' he repeated stupidly. 'Of course; I beg your pardon. I will see.'

He returned into the cool, dark stone chamber Griselda saw beyond the doorway. She stepped to the door, and wondered, with a dazed feeling, how she was

here. Was it all a dream? It seemed but yesterday she was in Feather's Court, standing in Hal's dressing-room, importuning Heaven for a sign that her darling lived. And now she was standing where he had stood, breathing the hot air he had breathed, gazing on a strange Eastern scene familiar to his eyes.

Footsteps, and the lieutenant came along a passage.

'If you will be so good as to come this way, the General will see you,' he said. He looked solemn, the tone of his voice sounded ominous to the faithful wife.

Still she followed him bravely along a narrow passage barely lighted by oblong holes in the thick walls, and stepped beyond a curtain he lifted respectfully, standing aside. She found herself in a

darkened chamber, with stone walls, inlaid flooring, and a high vaulted roof. At a rough office table sat General Grayburgh, leaning his head on his hand.

He came silently towards her, and led her to a seat. He was frightfully changed. Thin, haggard, with great bloodshot eyes, that were like those of a starved, hunted animal.

‘Poor, poor child!’ he stammered, taking one of her hands in both his trembling ones. ‘And you have come all this way—’

‘To find my husband. I cannot but believe that he is still alive,’ said Griselda boldly, her superhuman courage and strength reasserting itself. ‘Tell me—he is not dead!’

‘Then’—the General looked at her with a stare that had a ferocity of grief

in its wildness. It seemed to Griselda as if he hardly knew her—as if his senses left him then and there.

He staggered back, almost fell on the rough chair, and hiding his face, he sobbed—hard, dry sobs.





CHAPTER IX.



IT was a minute of fearful suspense, that spent by Griselda in the dimly-lit, solemn stone chamber in the Indian fortress, while the evidently broken-down old man, General Grayburgh, struggled to overcome his emotion.

Watching a ray of yellow light that fell upon his head through the dulled glass lozenges in a high window, upon the dishevelled grey hair that told tales of the neglect born of acute personal suffering, she still hoped.

This could not be merely the grief for lost comrades. There was a passion in it—an agony.

Quick as thought, she went across the slippery inlaid floor to the rough writing-table which had been knocked together for the General when he took up his abode in this, the palace occupied by generation after generation of native princes,—and laid her hand lightly on his arm. His chest moved less convulsively now. He raised his miserable, haggard face.

‘Do you know—all?’ he asked, fixing his eyes scrutinizingly upon her.

‘He is alive—tell me that he is alive!’ cried Griselda, in a sudden fury of hope, fear, kneeling down and grasping his knee.

‘Yes—yes,’ said the General, with

seeming astonishment. 'Of course! I wrote it to you—that first letter was a mistake.'

'You only wrote he was dead,' she cried, tears of joy streaming down her face. 'Say it again. What does anything matter now? Oh thank God! thank God!'

The General looked with infinite pity at the faithful loving wife who had dared death in its cruellest form to join her husband, if only his mutilated remains in the grave; then he gently assisted her to rise, placed her in his chair, fetched a curious old flagon and chased silver goblet from a marble bracket that jutted out from the wall, and said,—

'Drink a little, my child; it will do you good.'

The iced concoction of champagne and

sparkling water which the General's kit-mutghar, or native butler, had but just brought from a deep cellar as Griselda arrived, revived her. She looked anxiously at the old man as she drank. He was pacing the chamber, his hands behind him, as if mentally revolving some desperate battle or final sortie. He was really at his wits' end how much or how little to tell this young wife—who was so soon to pass the threshold of motherhood—of what had befallen her husband.

‘You are a good, brave girl, are you not?’ he said abruptly at last, dashing into the subject. ‘But, of course, you have proved it. Well, my first letter was gospel truth to me when I wrote it. We seemed to have conclusive evidence that Romaine was—well, that all was over with him. Two of his troop had

seen him cut down ; another said—' He stopped short. 'However, it is all right now ; so I will not harrow you with horrible details. Then they found one of the rebels with his watch and ring, and another wearing his uniform. But '—here the General paused, and, as a deep red flush rose to his brow, he stammered and went on hurriedly,—' Lady Hermione, who was with me, would not believe it. You are aware she had known your husband's family a long time. She—she organised a search-party, and a few days later I heard that, although he was desperately wounded, there were hopes of his recovery.'

'Oh, where—where is he ? Let me go to him !' implored Griselda.

'He is not here,' said the General. 'He is—some miles off in a village which

is fortunately friendly to us. He is in one of the best bungalows—the residence of a Government engineer, who luckily sent his family home at the very beginning of the Mutiny.’

‘But the last news?’

The General was silent, thought for moment, then said,—

‘Colonel Stone has the latest news, I think. If you will wait here a few minutes, I will step across the square to his quarters and he shall come to you.’

Griselda was as mentally dazzled by this great joy into which she was suddenly plunged after the strain she had almost miraculously undergone, as a blind man who regains his sight in the broad daylight. She could hardly bear the certainty that Hal lived, without some outbreak of violent emotion. The idea

that there was something sinister hidden that she had yet to learn did not occur to her. With trembling voice she expressed her gratitude. Of course she would be only too thankful to see Colonel Stone — she had heard his name often from her dear husband's lips. Then she asked if her maid, who was waiting without, might come to her.

‘Certainly,’ said the General, going off drearily.

‘Presently, in rushed Marshall; and in the two women's relief and joy the positions of mistress and maid were forgotten. Like sisters they embraced, and wept, and uttered incoherent exclamations of gratitude for safety, for peace.

The General, in his white helmet, his hands thrust into his pockets, skirted the sunlit court, and, turning his tired

eyes away from the blinding glare of the marble pavement, reached the doorway in the wall. Passing under the magnificent balcony, above which was a mass of raised carvings in precious marbles, he mounted a narrow stairway, and gained a tower where Colonel Stone lived with his wife and three children. Entering the first room, which, in spite of the moistened tatties, or grass blinds, was hot and close,—he found the Colonel seated on the floor, fanning his eldest little daughter, who lay with her head on his knee, her pale face thrown back.

‘Fever?’ said the General sympathetically.

The Colonel nodded, and pointed to a chair close by. In these days of trials, deprivation, and suffering of every sort, etiquette gave place to the dictates of

stricken hearts. There was scant ceremony, and but little talk. Men spoke by looks and by gestures, which were only too eloquent, only too suggestive of a great common woe.

The two officers talked in whispers.

The General told Griselda's tale in a few words.

Colonel Stone, a grey-haired but still young man, was the General's staunch adherent and old attached friend. He had been present at the late terrible crisis of General Grayburgh's life, which occurred shortly after the letter was written and despatched containing the announcement of the death of Captain Romaine. Lady Hermione, who had accompanied the regiment throughout, had been much with Captain Romaine. If she had petted him formerly, she

simply devoted herself entirely to him now ; and he felt the old affection reviving. While he was fighting against the rebels, he was succumbing to a deadly moral poison ; he went into battle enervated and hopeless. He told himself that his desperate feats were despair, and that he had the luck of those unfortunate in love. On the very eve of that fateful skirmish he had been betrayed into acknowledging to his Circe that he was won back, that she was victress, and for the future it would be Hermione, not Griselda ; but a desperate revulsion of feeling, when he found General Grayburgh overwhelmed with anxiety as to the fate of Colonel Solly, led him to insist on going to the rescue with a troop of picked men. He left without a word or a message to Lady

Hermione, and when he was cut down and slashed, when he saw an infuriated Sepoy raising his arm to deal the fatal blow, he resigned his soul to God with a great thankfulness that he was spared, saved, blessed.

Lady Hermione, after days of abject misery alternating with passionate love and rage,—as only such a woman in such a position can know,—saw the returning remnant of Hal's company, and, on hearing the news of his death, rushed madly into her husband's office, where he was closeted with Colonel Stone; and then ensued a scene which mentally shattered General Grayburgh, and filled the domesticated, gentle Colonel, who had been a good son to a widowed mother, and who was a loving father and devoted husband, with distress. Lady Hermione

flung herself about the room, upbraiding her husband for having sent the only being she loved to his death, confessing their long mutual love, and her hatred of the General in that she was doomed to be his wife. It was worse than a death-blow to the kind old man; and when, after Lady Hermione had started to find Hal, or his corpse, Colonel Stone attempted to soothe him by suggestions that women will confess any imaginary sin and wickedness in a sudden access of hysteria, he merely shook his head and said,—

‘I ask only one favour of you, Stone; never mention her to me again!’

Colonel Stone did as he was asked. But now it was the General who entered upon the subject himself.

After the story of Griselda’s journey

and arrival, there was a pause—then the General forced himself to say,—

‘Stone, you are experienced—married, I mean—you have a real wife; tell me what to do?’

‘I must think,’ said the Colonel.

Then there was silence in the hot room, broken only by the tramp of the sentry on the ramparts below, by the moaning of the sick child, by a subdued singing in the next room, as Mrs Stone hushed her delicate young infant, born since the regiment had occupied the fortress.

After a minute’s pause, Colonel Stone said slowly,—

‘General, you have recurred to the painful subject I gave you my word not to allude to. I am glad you have given me the opportunity to repeat emphati-

cally that on that occasion your wife was, in my opinion, temporarily mad. There may have been some sentiment—women will have their sentiments, especially about young fellows half their age—but, as I live, I firmly believe that all else but the bare sentiment was delirious raving. I am told that Lady Hermione has not seen Romaine since he became conscious.’

The General sighed; a dark look passed across his face.

‘What I wanted you to decide is this,’ he said. ‘What is to be done with this poor unfortunate girl in her state? Dare I let her go to that iniquitous house, to a man who has been false to his marriage vows? Oh, don’t interrupt! Don’t defend them! I asked your advice for this good faithful wife, not for a traitress.’

‘Let her go at once — to-day,’ said Colonel Stone, emphatically. ‘Meanwhile, let us make her as welcome as we can. She must be an extraordinary woman!’

‘She is,’ said the General, warmly. ‘If all were like her, England would abound with heroes, and hold her own against the world. It is the mothers that make the sons, the wives the husbands.’

‘But perhaps it might be said by women, that they are what we make them,’ suggested the Colonel, meekly.

Then he called, and an ayah came and took his place. He kissed his poor little daughter, and went down and across the court to the General’s rooms.

Griselda rose and welcomed him as he entered. The Colonel was taken aback as he saw this beautiful fair

creature, who had as it were dropped from the clouds, radiant with blessedness. What a cruel shame it would be, he thought indignantly, if the General were right, and Hal Romaine was—yes, there was only one word that fitted—a blackguard!

He bowed with the deepest respect over Mrs Romaine's extended hand.

‘It seems as if the age of miracles had returned,’ he said admiringly. ‘To think of your traversing this wretched country, going through those crowds of demons unharmed—it is a miracle! Heaven grant you have brought a blessing with you! We are sadly forlorn—God-forsaken—here.’

Then he told her how they had suffered from want of food, want of the most ordinary comforts—how they

had been parched with thirst, and how the children had died of fever, so that scarcely a day passed but there was a burial in the mosque without the fort which was used for Christian services.

‘But we shall be able to take care of you till evening,’ he said cheerily. ‘I will go at once and see about it. Then I will accompany you to the bungalow where your husband is, I am thankful to say, slowly recovering.’

He went away, wondering. After this journey of Griselda’s, he felt he should never despair, never think the wildest idea unrealisable.

He borrowed an ayah from the widow of a major lately killed, whose grief had but enhanced her natural sympathies. He had mattresses placed for Griselda and her maid in the stone

chamber which the General willingly resigned to the travellers.

Griselda slept heavily, dreamlessly, and awoke in the late afternoon to see dusky forms in strange dresses flitting about in the half-light—her servants, bringing in dinner. After she and Marshall had eaten, the General and Colonel Stone came in; and presently the little procession, that had astonished the officers by its unexpected arrival in the early morning, left the gates,—watched and saluted by many who had heard the story of its brave progress, unscathed, through untold dangers.

The Colonel walked by Griselda's litter down the uneven road. Arrived at the foot of the slope, they proceeded along the river bank. To their right towered the grand white pile of Oriental

buildings, the gilded cupolas glistening in the setting sun—to the left, the wooded hills above the blood-red river were already in the shadow. Long before they reached the outlying cantonment which skirted the native village, the golden and crimson tints had faded to dull yellow and pink. Then came a luminous twilight, in which white objects seemed brilliant, faces paled, and the lights they were approaching were glowing red specks, dazzling as fireflies. Strange insects buzzed; frogs croaked in their damp retreats. Then came a road bordered by scattered bungalows in their compounds, or rather square buildings, with verandahs of different sizes, standing in plots of ground more or less cultivated, divided from each other by mud walls or hedges of shrubs.

One of these was more pretentious than the rest. Graceful trees were planted to screen the compound from the road. Two stood as dark sentinels in the rising moonlight, guarding the white posts of the open entrance to the carriage-drive.

Here the Colonel gave the word to halt.

After the noise of the footsteps had subsided, they heard faint sounds of music. Griselda listened, astonished. Music, here—now? She held out her hand silently to the Colonel, alighted, and listened.

Then she bent her head; some one was playing softly, sweetly, sadly, a favourite sacred song of hers—the holy, placid melody of Mendelssohn's, known as 'Ye hills and vales.'

While she was thrilled with emotion, the Colonel, who was absolutely unmusical, was angered, disappointed. To him that music meant fresh entanglement between the unhappy young officer and his general's unscrupulous wife.

‘You had better let me go first and announce you,’ he suggested to Griselda, repressing his indignation.

‘No, no,’ said she. ‘Do not think me ungrateful,’ she went on pleadingly—‘indeed I shall never forget your kindness; but—I feel—I know—it is better I should go alone.’

The Colonel hesitated a moment. The idea of the unsuspecting young wife finding a species of deputy installed under her husband's roof, shocked him.

‘I think—indeed I am sure—now I have heard the music, that Lady Her-

mione Grayburgh is still there. She found him, you know, and I am told that he in a great measure owes his life to her and her maid's nursing.'

He put it as neatly as he could. He saw a strange smile come upon Griselda's face, which looked unearthly in the moonlight; it reminded him of some picture he had seen—an angel bearing a little child to heaven.

'I know Lady Hermione,' said Griselda simply. 'Colonel Stone, I think people sometimes can talk better to each other quite by themselves. You don't mind?' she added apologetically.

'Good heavens, no!' exclaimed the Colonel, started into involuntary energy. Then, after some conversation as to what it would be best to do about the servants, *et cætera*, he took leave

of Mrs Romaine with the deepest respect.

‘She suspects, or knows,’ he thought, as he made his way back to the fortress in the moonlight, ‘and behaves like a true unselfish woman. She is a lesson to any man. What hope! what faith!’





CHAPTER X.



RISELDA left her party, and walked up the drive to the bungalow alone. The moonlight showed the graceful Indian corn, the groves of strange dream-like plants, in their full beauty of form without colour. For paths, grass, trees, plants, and bungalow alike, were dazzling, frosted white. The shadows lay blackly on the lawn. Near to the house was a well. She heard the splash of the drops as they fell from the little chatties, or earthenware vessels that hung from the

wheel, into the water deep down below. The open doors showed the lighted interior.

Stepping lightly into the verandah, she came to the long window of the drawing-room, and stood hesitating—for there was Lady Hermione, seated in a low wicker chair—alone. She was dressed in white. Her magnificent black hair was cut close to her head. She looked pale, thin, miserable, as she sat still, staring at vacancy.

‘Lady Hermione!’

She sprang up with a terrified stare at the woman’s figure in the doorway and a stifled ‘Ah!’

‘I beg your pardon for having startled you,’ said Griselda. ‘I may come in, may I not? I am Griselda Romaine.’

‘Yes,’ said Lady Hermione, in a dull, stupefied way.

During these last days she had ceased to care, almost to feel. She would have welcomed any violent change, however disastrous. There had been moments when she thought that, if an overwhelming force of the frantic hordes were to break in upon the fort and surrounding villages, she would awake from this death in life with a fierce rejoicing at the chance of a swift martyrdom which might hurl her into a better state. She told herself she had staked her all—and that she had lost.

This sudden appearance of Griselda was a slight relief. She would be free to go—she knew not whither—to do any desperate deed—she knew not what.

‘You were quite right to dare the

journey and to come, Mrs Romaine,' she said in a dull, unemotional way. 'Your husband mistook me for you during his delirium, and, when he came to his senses, was so disappointed not to find his beloved wife, that he turned his face to the wall and refused to be comforted. Finding my presence unpleasant to him, I have kept away since then, only superintending the nursing. He is getting on well.'

By some subtle sympathy Griselda knew this woman had dared all for Hal, and he had repaid her — thus! The tears rushed to her eyes. She seized Lady Hermione's hand and kissed it.

'It was you who saved him,' she said brokenly. 'My poor thanks—what are they? God will repay you—you,

who have done the utmost one can do for a friend—you, who have risked your life for his!’

‘Life?’ said Lady Hermione bitterly, while her hand lay cold in Griselda’s. ‘What a poor thing is life! It is the happy who value it; but to the unhappy it is a curse! There is not much credit in flinging away a curse, is there?’ she went on, with a sneering smile and a flash of her dark eyes. ‘But come to your husband—or will you have wine—food—before you go?’

Griselda, affected by the despair of the woman who, in her eyes—whatever she might have done—was the preserver of her Hal’s life, briefly told her tale, then followed Lady Hermione to her husband’s room.

At the door she halted. In her mingled

emotion this was an awful moment. He had left her in full life, in bright—to her almost glorious—manhood. What pitiful wreck, what miserable remnant of a human being lay beyond that closed door, and was still her own husband, her childhood's love, the little Prince who stepped down into the orchard to her years ago and took possession of her life?

And, if it had not been for this devoted, if reckless woman, there would have been no Hal—only a grave, and a memory.

With a sudden passion of gratitude, she held out her hand.

‘Let us go together, she said, with a pleading tender look.

Lady Hermione shook her head with a bitter smile.

‘He must know—he must be told he owes his life to you,’ began Griselda.

Then suddenly she flung her arms round the suffering beautiful creature, and kissed her on the lips.

Thus Hal's first kiss should be to them both.

‘I will come back,’ she said. ‘Dear Lady Hermione, I must see you soon again;’ then she opened the door and went in boldly.

A dimly-lighted room; a bed in the coolest part, close under the swaying frilled board, the punkah; the odours of pungent restoratives and disinfectants; a soldier sitting by the bedside.

He rose as she entered, saluted her, and stared with amazement. But this Corporal Haines, one of the young captain's faithful military nurses, knew without much thought that this could be no other than the wife the sick man

had craved for with a weary persistence painful to witness.

‘Captain,’ he said cautiously, bending over the form lying — oh, so still! — stretched upon the bed, ‘here’s a surprise for you—a friend from home!’

He motioned to Griselda to stand back in the shadow; then he raised the sick man in his arms

Could that be Hal — the thin livid features, with a disfiguring scar across one cheek—the great piteous eyes—all the curls gone, and in their place bandages, plaster—that white empty sleeve rolled up?

The loving wife sickened. How she stepped across the room, knelt down, and took him in her arms she could not have told. Perhaps for a few moments she fainted — she did not know. The

world seemed to sink away—the world, with its anger, cruelty, revenge, turmoil—to sink away as the flood may suddenly have stayed, sunk, and disappeared at the voice of God—and they two, after struggle, danger, left alone, clinging to each other as on some rock—saved.

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Hal made slow but sure progress—the new Captain Romaine! Even Griselda sometimes wondered and felt a sense of unreality when she thought of the gay impetuous Hal, and then looked at the delicate invalid with the solemn eyes that had such an unearthly searching look in them

‘What the Captain wants now is rousing, Mrs Romaine,’ said the regimental doctor who had ‘patched up’ the ‘ugly job,’ as he had called Hal’s case

in its beginning. 'If it were only anxiety, even annoyance— Is he always like this? Does he never talk of the past, or'—here the doctor hesitated, but only for a moment—'of future hopes that should be cheering to a man, should be a great object to live for?'

Griselda blushed, but this was no time for feminine sensibility.

'Not one word,' she said. 'He is very good, wonderfully patient. I read to him a little. But he only talks of the small matters of the day itself—of the Indian servants, their ways, the weather, things like those. And, whenever I turn my back for a moment, he relapses into that dreamy state.'

'I know—as if he were looking into another world with those big eyes of his. I've seen him. Of course, when you can

take him home, it will be all right—change of scene and the sea-voyage. But that can't be quite yet. Meanwhile I must think of something.'

The doctor had thought already. He knew the scandal about Lady Hermione. It had grieved him, as it had grieved many who were attached to the General, while they had liked 'young Romaine,' and admired the beautiful lady who had so unfortunately fallen into hero-worship. He attributed Hal's melancholy to a certain remorse and a certain sense of dishonour. Now, as the doctor said to himself plausibly, it was quite right for the young fellow to regret having made mischief between the General and his wife, so long as the mischief was there. But really, as everything was going well—now that his wife was here,

and he and she on the most loving terms, while Mrs Romaine and Lady Hermione corresponded or exchanged messages daily, and the General seemed quite content—a new man indeed—it was high time that disagreeable by-gones should be by-gones.

‘We should do with our mistakes as with our dead leaves,’ he went on to himself, as he proceeded to General Grayburgh’s quarters to ask him to come and see Hal. ‘Malodorous in themselves, they become almost salutary in a bonfire.’

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The General and his wife were reconciled. And it came about thus. Lady Hermione had remained in the bungalow a few days, at Griselda’s instance. And during those days she learnt the beauty of

meekness, the divinity of forgiveness. In the long talks between the two women, Hermione found that there was scarcely anything in her past relations with Captain Romaine that was unknown to his devoted wife, and that, without doubt, whatever Griselda knew Griselda had forgiven. During those days of utter wretchedness, when Hal refused to see her, would taste nothing her hands had touched, and would shrink at the very mention of her name, she had been able to think of little but the great lost tenderness that had hitherto come between her and the slightest annoyance,—the vast protecting love of her outraged husband.

General Grayburgh was a great, good man. Even on the terrible night, when in her madness she had flung herself out of

his heart and outraged his honour, she admired the nobility of his anger; he had made no expostulation, he had merely held out his hand with a gesture of horror, and had said one word,—‘Go!’

During those calm hours in the drawing-room with Griselda, when they talked in a low voice while Hal slept in his sick-room, she made a resolution.

‘If I do not get his pardon,’ she thought, ‘at least I will ask it.’

So one evening after she and Griselda had dined, and Griselda had left her to go to Hal, she went to her room, put on a long dust-cloak and a veil, and walked to the fort.

She did not know the pass-word, and the sentry hesitated to admit her. This hesitation stung her to the quick, and she imperiously flashed a well-known

ring of General Grayburgh's before his eyes.

‘You forget yourself,’ she said proudly, and passed on.

Armed with this spirit of pride, she gained his quarters, passed the sentry there, and, flinging aside the curtain of that stone chamber which was fraught with so many strange troublous memories, found herself standing face to face with her gaunt, stern husband.

He rose as he saw her. They stood gazing at each other for a few moments. Then she said, with a desperate humility, which was the subtlest pride—

‘I have come to ask your pardon before I go away for ever.’

The General looked at her in wonder—then his head fell on his breast.

‘Oh, you poor, poor woman!’ he

said falteringly. 'You come to me, a man! You ask me to right your soul! Go to your God; he can forgive you—not I, nor any man that has ever lived!'

Then he went away into a corner, where the rays of the lamps did not reach, and leaned against a marble pillar in his access of misery. Softened, penitent, she followed him and fell weeping against his shoulder.

'You must forgive me first!' she sobbed.

And he took her into his arms, more wretched than ever, and forgave her.

'Poor girl! I was too old,' he said brokenly. 'I had no right to bind you down.'

She had conquered. And the General felt that he had lost many battles and had been defeated otherwise, time after time, elsewhere than in the field during

his long life ; but this was the first occasion that he felt the utter littleness of human glory, the utter abasement of his erring human soul.

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A few months later, Feather's Court, in the gay beauty of the young summer, was the scene of great rejoicing.

The new peal of bells presented to the church by Hal as a thank-offering were chiming merrily. For to-day, the lusty boy who first saw light in the Indian bungalow where his father had struggled back to life, was to be publicly received into the Church by his delighted grandfather — whose first service this would be since his return to England, convalescent.

The new heir to the Romaines was a peculiar child, with fine, deep eyes.

He was six months old that day, when he sat up in his mother's arms and looked steadily at the clergyman who was admitting him into the Church.

Griselda had a new hope in this world. What mattered the sad stormy past? Its dead were buried. This child, this son of hers, had given her a new life. She had awakened into a new beauty ; she had at last something fresh and pure from the hand of God to live for.

Patience was over ! Now came the reign of hopeful joy.

THE END.



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